Procedural Religion in Videogames

A narratological and ludological analysis of how religious ideas are reflected, rejected and reconfigured in Final Fantasy X and Bloodborne

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Masteroppgave i Religion og Samfunn ved det teologiske fakultet

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Abstract

Videogames are an expressive medium. Much like with other forms for entertainment and popular culture, its purpose is to engage an audience and entertain. Popular culture has become more widely accepted as a platform that overlaps the lines between low- and high culture (Løland, Martinsen, Skippervold 2014: 10 – translated), and as a result; opens for new ways to study and interpret various aspects of society. Videogames, in comparison to other types of popular culture, open for new ways to interpret these aspects, as they allow the consumer to interact with the product, and through this interaction, new interpretations can be created. This is a study on how the videogames Bloodborne and Final Fantasy X reflect, reject or reconfigure religious ideas and investigate what kind of religious critique that is implied in their procedural rhetoric. The study uses the theories of procedurality, procedural representation and procedural rhetoric, developed by videogame-designer and academic Ian Bogost in 2010 and procedural religion, coined by professor Vit Šisler in 2016. These theories allow for a new way to look at the expressive and persuasive capabilities of videogames through their computational design. To analyze a videogame's structure, the study will also use the terms of game world, player/character and game activities, coined by professor Óliver Pérez Latorre in 2015 to look at the game's design from various standpoints. Through their ludological and narratological structure I have made the discovery that Final Fantasy X's procedural religion express a rhetoric of no-religion, whereas Bloodborne's expresses religion as an unchangeable entity at its core, only corrupted by human intervention. I have also found that the religious critique implied in the games carries resemblance to the modern philosophical thinkers of Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx. However, while FFX endorses Nietzsche's critique of religion, Bloodborne critiques it. Videogames carry a reflection of how we perceive various aspects of modern society. The rhetorical value of analyzing videogames is found in their participatory nature. Allowing oneself to be immersed, not just by the narrative, but also the ludic design, allows for meaningful representation to be created that could not be expressed in other types of popular culture.

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Preface

That it should be a bittersweet moment to hand in my thesis proves that the last two years have been filled with productivity and high motivation. I had never imagined that I would write a thesis about religion and videogames; the best of two worlds. In many ways, it is a dream come true. I would lie if I said that the road has not been bumpy, but it was well worth it, and most days were filled with motivation rather than discouragement. All of it will be missed.

Now that the thesis is completed, I have to thank everyone who has shown me support and encouraged me. I want to thank the Theological Faculty of Oslo that offered us master-students to travel during our studies. My time at Union Theological Seminary was fantastic and helpful, much because of the amazing people I met there. I also want to thank all of my friends and fellow videogame-enthusiasts who have shown incredible interest in reading my thesis. I cannot wait to show it to you. I also want to thank Liv Bjørkedal, my friend and colleague, who has read through the thesis and corrected my grammar. I am forever grateful. I want to thank my parents, who have shown nothing but support. It has been invaluable.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my supervisor Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen: Thank you for your encouraging and specific feedback. Your faith in this thesis and in me has done nothing but increase my motivation. Without your support and guidance, this thesis would never have seen the light of day. I could not have wished for a better advisor.

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1 Introduction

1.1   Videogames as an expressive medium

This thesis will address videogames as a medium that potentially carries meaning and rhetorical value, explicitly looking at religion. Videogames are a part of popular culture and should be treated as such. But much like with movies, books and television series; videogames could potentially have more depth than meets the eye.

> And many phrases of popular culture have through the times received a higher cultural status. Thus, it might ensue an overlapping between low culture and high culture, and popular culture is a place where this overlapping might occur (Løland, Martinsen, Skippervold 2014: 10 – translated).

Videogames in comparison to other types of popular culture, are unique as their participatory nature potentially allows the user to be the source of the meaning-making. It is a medium that is highly discussed, as its commercial success is clear, yet still struggling to be accepted as a cultural form (Bogost 2010: vii). Seriousness in games is defined through the context of the game. Even though it is "played" it still carries deeper expressions and semiotics that can categorize the game as serious, and be interpreted as serious regarding the game's narrative.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate what type of religious critique videogames can carry through their interactive nature: "Videogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them" (Bogost 2010: vii). Throughout the early 2000s, gaming and videogames have become more accepted as a part of people's hobbies, but is yet still quite often frowned upon as anything other than entertainment purposes. I believe that, just like with movies and TV-series, videogames can reflect, reject or reconfigure (Šisler 2016: 127) ideas based in modern society.

This thesis will introduce the reader to how videogames can be analyzed and from the analysis extract what sort of meaning-making they potentially are able to produce with the emphasis on religious critique as the subject of research. More specifically, I want to do a comparative case study (Flyvbjerg 2010) of two specific games of my choice, which I suspect carry rhetorical value relating to religious critique. I have chosen to pick the two games *Final Fantasy X* (2002) (*FFX* for short) and *Bloodborne* (2015) as empirical material of my

analysis. These two games were initially picked based on my early suspicions and impression that games could carry elements or notions that represented some form of religious critique. The step by step analysis I have conducted has confirmed my hypothesis, but the religious critique I have found are not identical to my initial expectations. One of the major, and truly surprising findings is that *FFX* represents a religious critique that is questioned in *Bloodborne*.

Videogames have become more popular, not only amongst those who label themselves as gamers. In this sense, videogames have become a medium which creates both negative and positive reactions. As a result, videogames have also caught attention of academics as a potential research field. I myself have been playing videogames for almost two decades, and through the last couple of years I have developed an academical interest in them as well. Videogames can express and create typified versions and reflection of the real world, and can through this ability express critique, dismay, appraisal etc. on several aspects of our society. The most prominent academical debate is about videogames' rhetorical value. However, it has been proven several times from earlier research that videogames can potentially carry worthy findings. These can be used to look at how one perceives society through popular culture, and I will mention some of these researchers in a later paragraph.

It is important to note that videogames can be analyzed in numerous ways. For example, one can analyze how videogames portray gender, historical events, controversy and politics and how they contribute to the player's own interpretation of these portrayals. Several game franchises, like *Call of Duty* (2003-) are famous for their portrayal of the Second World War, while the *Tomb Raider* franchise (1996-) is known for their depiction of *Lara Croft* as a strong, (perhaps sexualized) female protagonist. What is important to note from these videogames are that they create their own worlds for the player to interact in. These can be purely fictitious, or a reflection of the real world.

The games I have chosen are worlds of fiction, but also carry resemblances and reflections of certain elements and entities of the real world, such as religion, mythology and politics. I have chosen to focus on religion in videogames because pop-culture is becoming more recognized as a platform for expression. Religion is a big part of our everyday lives, yet it is not often mentioned in comparison to gender when it comes to videogames' content. My aim is to endorse the fact that games can express religious ideas and notions that reflects how religion is perceived in society. More specifically, I will be looking at external religious critique,

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which aims to challenge religion from something outside of it. The idea is to look at how *Bloodborne* and *FFX'* religious critique carries similarities to the critique that was developed by modern philosophers at the start of the 20th century.

1.2   Research question and terminology

Through analyzing *Bloodborne* and *Final Fantasy X* I will answer the following research question along and three sub-questions:

1.   How can games reflect, reject and reconfigure religious ideas, and does the immanent representation of religion in the videogames contain religious critique, and what kind of religious critique is implied in the procedural religion of the videogame?

The purpose of the sub-questions is to aid me in answering the research question:

1.   How does the game world contribute to the immanent religious narrative in videogames?

2.   How does the player/character contribute to the immanent religious narrative in videogames?

3.   How do the game activities contribute to the immanent religious narrative in videogames?

Procedural religion is a more specified category within procedural rhetoric (the practice of persuasive processes and how they are utilized), and are the processes within the game that creates representations and typified versions of real world religions through procedurality and procedural representation (Šisler 2016: 130). Procedural religion is specifically looking at religious ideas and notions and their functions within the games' rule-systems.

Immanent religious narrative points to the game's fictional religious elements and notions and how these contribute to the narrative and structure of the game. The sub-questions are there to analyze the videogames' ludological design and its connection to the narratological design in relation to religion and religious critique. The ludology of a videogame is its formal structure and design – the rules designed for the player to be able to interact with it - and is what makes

each videogame unique. Along with the ludological design, videogames also have a narratological design (Šisler 2016: 128).

By analyzing the ludological and narratological designs of the videogame, and answering the sub questions systematically, I will be able to answer the research question. The purpose of the first sub-question is to answer how the game world, both in its ludological and narratological design, contributes to immersing the participator into the religious narrative of the game. The second sub-question's purpose is to analyze the player's own participatory nature with the characters in the videogame to define how they contribute to the immanent religious narrative. The third sub-question aims at integrating the narratological and ludological structure of the videogame through the activities the player is designed to do within the game's parameters. These three sub-questions will contribute to the overall research question, and reveal the game's structure in order to describe and discuss the game's potential meaning-making.

When studying videogames there are several terminologies that need explaining regarding the understanding of videogames. For non-consumers of videogames, several aspects of the medium might be confusing and incomprehensible as many of these terminologies are already well-defined and understood by most gamers. I highly recommend referring to the appendix attached when reading this thesis should the reader not be familiar with videogame jargon and terminology.

1.3   Earlier research

In the following paragraphs, I will cover previous research regarding analysis of videogames. This is to be able to map what my own thesis contributes to the field, as well as to make the reader aware of the various topics that videogames can contribute to when regarded as a field of study. In the first paragraph, I will cover the national and international coverage of videogame studies and what type of research we can find when searching for previous work. In the second paragraph, I intend to mention previous research from other academics in more detail and how it is connected to my own thesis. Lastly, I will try and place my own research in relation to previous work and how it potentially adds something new to the field of videogame analysis.

Videogames have become a more accepted platform for academic research. From a national, Norwegian coverage, videogames have become a more frequent field of study. When I went to the University in Oslo's page DUO (UiO's archive for previous master theses) and searched for "videospill" and "dataspill" (Norwegian for videogames and computer games) and "videogames", I found several theses dating back to as early as 1995. However, these included mostly videogames as a medium for educational purposes, the effects computer games have on the participator or even analysis regarding specific genres unique to the videogame category.

I tried narrowing down the search by applying "religion" to the search field, but my results came up empty. To investigate the more international coverage of videogame studies, I searched for "videogames" on the UiO's University of Oslo Library archive and came across several articles and books regarding videogames as a field of study. These included fields regarding videogames as educational purposes, videogames as means to reflect discourse, videogames and ethics and articles analyzing specific games' narrative in various academic perspectives.

I then applied "videogames religion" in the search field and found several articles regarding how to look at religion in videogames, how to analyze religion in videogames and even some articles studying how to teach religious studies through videogames. Lastly, I searched for "videogames religious critique". This of course narrowed the search, but I came by a few articles, discussing more specific games.

These are a few examples of various articles that analyze and utilize videogames as a part of their field of study. The following articles include analyzing genders in videogames and the sexualization of the female body, social discourse in videogames, how religion is created in videogames, to religious critique in videogames. This includes the works of Martins, Williams, Harrison and Ratan (2009), Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel and Fritz (2016), Lunde (2015), Washburn (2009), Tucket and Robertson (2014), Bosman (2014 and 2017), Latorre (2015), Šisler (2016) and Bogost (2010). These are connected to the studies of videogames and videogame analysis from various perspectives. The articles are mentioned in relation to how relevant they are to this thesis, from least relevant to more relevant.

Both Martins, Williams, Harrison and Ratan (2009) and Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel and Fritz (2016) analyze videogames as a product of modern society, looking at how videogames

have perceived sex and gender for the last decades. Specifically, they look at how videogames depict the female body as overly sexualized and how it has changed through the years, and is a quite common subject of discussion when debating about the videogame culture.

Lunde (2015) focuses his master thesis on how videogames can be used as a means of learning and increasing motivation through the gameplay and the context. He uses a case study where he explores the games' context, structure and how they represent history through the ludological structure of the videogame. In short, his thesis functions as a way to interpret and analyze videogames from a didactic perspective, and as a medium potentially to be used in education.

Washburn (2009) emphasizes *Final Fantasy X* (2002) and the means to understand the narrative as a representation of historical events and patterns. By looking at the fictitious world of FFX and its semiotics and structure, Washburn argues that the game can potentially reflect the history of real world through its narrative. It is worth noting that I am using him as an example, not only because of his way of analyzing videogames, but also because I analyze FFX in my thesis.

Tucket and Robertson's article (2014) is about how religion can be researched in videogames, and look at the methodological and theoretical issues that can occur when performing such a research. They address that videogames have potential in terms of academic research, but that the scholar must be aware of the various approaches and the meaning that can be created depending on what approach and perspective one takes when integrating the category of "videogames and religion".

Bosman (2017) approaches "religion and videogames" through a case study of *BioShock Infinite* (2013), a game which since its release has received criticism for its depiction of American-Christian fundamentalism. His focus is on how the game has been able to affect the participator through its narrative and gameplay. In his conclusion, his focus on real world reactions of the virtual narrative of *BioShock Infinite* and how potentially powerful videogame narratives can be.

I have chosen not analyze videogames with gender or didactics as my goal, as these are topics that have already been discussed in several articles. Although religion is mentioned, it is not nearly as discussed within the videogame genre compared to gender or didactics. It is my aim to contribute to the field of study by looking at the videogames from a religious field, rather than from a historical, gender or didactical one.

Lastly, I want to mention the works of Latorre (2015), Šisler (2016) and Bogost (2010). Their theories and research is what I will use when performing my own analysis. Latorre (2015) uses the structure of videogames (ludology) to show how the game *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) potentially can persuade and create meaning behind its means of play. Šisler (2016) brings forth how a videogame through its ludological structure, cultural influences and means of play potentially can create representations of real world entities, more specifically religion. Bogost (2010) focuses on how to look at videogames as an expressive medium. His work focuses on the more general aspect of analyzing videogames, meaning that his work concludes with videogames being such an expressive medium that it potentially can be researched through various ways. It may be used in terms of politics, education, religion, social discourses, critique and so forth. These three theories, from Latorre, Šisler and Bogost is what ties my analysis together and is crucial when answering my research question.

1.4   Religious critique in videogames

My thesis, as mentioned, will focus on how the immanent religious representation in videogames can potentially contain religious critique, either by reflecting, rejecting or reconfiguring religious ideas and notions. I have brought several examples of what videogame analysis might consist of. All of them consists of how the virtual reality of videogames reflect certain aspects of the real world, but from different perspectives. While some of the research focuses on how videogames represent modern society's view on certain entities, such as gender (Martins, Williams, Harrison, Ratan 2009), others might criticize modern history, such as American-Christian fundamentalism (Bosman 2017).

My own research, much like the others, will be looking at how the virtual reality of videogames reflect or reject entities we familiarize ourselves with in the real world. More specifically I will look at how *Bloodborne* and *FFX* represent religious ideas, notions and influences from the real world, and how these influences can resemble philosophical religious critique, such as either Nietzsche, Marx, Feuerbach or Freud. While others, more specifically Bosman (2017) has his emphasis on religious critique from an American-Christian point of view, my own thesis will be to identify how games might bear resemblance with religious critique from a modern philosophical point of view. It is worth noting that I will not look at how the immanent religious narrative creates typified versions of real world religions, but rather focus only on the potential religious critique.

1.5 Research design

It is important to note with the research question in mind, that it is difficult to conduct a videogame analysis without any sort of experience. In other words, it requires me as a researcher to be a participator of the game, and research what exactly the immanent religious narrative is in the games. By using the empirical material as a case study, it is easier to emphasize the uniqueness of each game. The unique design makes it hard to generalize videogames' ability to express themselves. There are many potential ways a game can be designed in a ludological and narratological fashion, that each game can bring various findings depending on its content. The idea is that these theories can be used in various games to look at the immanent religious narrative, regardless of the games' content. I have chosen to focus on resemblances of external religious critique in the games *Bloodborne* and *FFX*, with these theories in mind, as the games can be analyzed with different methods depending on the researcher's focus and intention.

1.6 Consideration of research

My thesis is a multidisciplinary project applying academic resources both from the fields of religious and media studies. However, considering what I want to discover and unveil through the analysis of videogames, my research tilts more towards the religious studies, while still using terminology from media studies and computation. This is because videogames are a part of media, but can easily be used to connect multidisciplinary practices from various studies.

Looking specifically at the multidisciplinary connection between media and religious studies, we have for instance the work of Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler (2018) which unravels several methods to study religion and videogames, giving a broad spectrum of various ways to interpret and look at videogames through the same multidisciplinary practice. The work of Bogost (2010) and his terminologies from the computational discipline of media studies is also essential to utilize the multidisciplinary potential that videogames have with several different discourses.

In my method of research, I will utilize the terminologies from media studies to accentuate the expressive and persuasive power of videogames. Furthermore, it is also important that I

integrate these terminologies to the field of religious studies, and use religious discourse to show what kind of immanent religious narrative exists within the chosen games. By utilizing terminologies from both respectable disciplines, I will be able reveal the representations that the computational aspect of videogames creates through both a narratological and ludological structure and use them to find the religious critique that potentially lies within the design of the videogames.

1.7   The thesis buildup and overall structure

My thesis will be structured into six chapters. The first chapter will consist of this introduction. The second chapter will be the methodology. Here I will explain how I intend to perform a case study of the empirical material, and how I will structure the analysis and the rest of the thesis.

The third chapter will be the theoretical chapter, solely focusing on the groundwork of how I will analyze the videogames. Its purpose is to portrait how media and religious studies will tie together and how I intend to analyze *Bloodborne* and *Final Fantasy X* by utilizing the theories I mention in this chapter.

The fourth chapter will be my analysis of *FFX*. This chapter intends to introduce a game that is linear, yet deep in its expressiveness and persuasiveness. I will analyze the games on three different levels using the theories explained in the theoretical chapter.

The fifth chapter will consist of an analysis of *Bloodborne*, with the same methodology as with *FFX*. However, rather than to exclusively analyze *Bloodborne*, I intend to do a comparative analysis of them after describing *Bloodborne's* narratological and ludological structure. This is to compare how different games can potentially produce various expressive and persuasive elements despite the games being completely different from each other in terms of genre, narrative, gameplay and design.

The sixth chapter will consist of a discussion part regarding my findings and how these answers my research question as well as a conclusion, shortly summarizing my findings and how my work will benefit the fields of media and religious studies.

2 Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain the methods I will use to answer the research question and analyze the material of this thesis. Firstly, I will be explaining my choice in games, and how they carry differences and similarities to other studies of videogames that have been conducted. Secondly, I will explain how I established the material, and the theoretical frameworks used to establish it. Thirdly, I will define my role as a researcher and how I as a researcher correlate to me as a gamer, and the advantages and disadvantages of analyzing empirical material that I am familiar with and have a "natural access to" (Alvesson 2003: 174). How does this insider-position add to the research, and what issues might occur with such a perspective? Lastly, I will go through the strategy of the analysis, and how I intend to structure it.

2.1   Selection

In the context of my research I can define my sample as an information-oriented selection. Flyvbjerg (2011: 307) defines this as "the utility of information from small samples of single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content". Unlike randomized sampling, meant to help generalize a topic, the empirical material of this thesis is carefully chosen because I have certain expectations of their content in relation to religion. The cases I have chosen, approach the topic of religion and religious narrative differently regarding their ludological and narratological design, defining the selection as a maximum variation case study (Flyvbjerg 2011: 307).

When I started theorizing about the study of religion and videogames and how the immanent religious narrative can potentially contribute to religious critique, I was looking at games I had previously played throughout my years as a gamer. I suspected several games had some form of religious critique, as it is apparent in other types of popular culture, like movies, TV-series and books, and that I could potentially find it also in videogames. The most obvious choice for me initially was *Final Fantasy X*. When it was released back in 2002 (2001 in Japan), I did not really pay attention to the religious narrative in the game. However, I have since then played through it to its completion a few more times, and taken notice of the religious narrative elements in *FFX*.

I then started to look at how other games implement religious elements and notions into their narrative and ludological design. This expanded from games that used typified religions of our world, such as historical strategy games, to games that create their own virtual religion carrying similarities to religious elements from our reality. At first, I tried to recall which previous games I played through in order to map which of them had religious semiotics, critique, symbolism and notions. I then narrowed it down to games I felt critiqued religion or carried elements of religion in them, like baptism, sacrifice, fundamentalism, cosmogony and martyrdom. This brought up a few games, which included *BioShock Infinite* (2013), *Dark Souls 1-3* (2011-2016), *Mass Effect 1-3* (2007-2012) and *Bloodborne* (2015). All of these videogames are possible choices in order to look at the immanent religious narrative in videogames, and are games I am familiar with in terms of their story and gameplay.

After thoroughly playing through *Dark Souls*, *Mass Effect, Bloodborne* and *BioShock Infinite,* I decided to choose *Bloodborne* as my second game to analyze. Its narrative and ludological design will make it different in comparison to *Final Fantasy X*. Their content and their approach to the topics of religion and religious critique differ enough from each other to fulfill the requirements of a maximum variation study (Flyvbjerg 2011: 307).

[Figure 1.1: Official cover of *Final Fantasy X* PS2]

FFX is a game created by the development company Square Enix in 2001 and later remastered to high definition graphics in 2013. It is the tenth installment of the *Final Fantasy* franchise, and is the first installment which introduces the use of voice actors within the franchise. This is because it was the first Final Fantasy to be created for the PlayStation 2 console, which proved to be a success, reaching scores of 9.3/10 and 92/100 by various game-review sites such as *IGN* and *Metacritic*, having more than 14 million copies sold worldwide. Although the games are named in a chronological fashion, the different *Final Fantasy* games have their own independent stories, introducing new characters, new worlds and new game activities. They are all part of the genre which is called *jRPG* or «Japanese role-playing game». They are often identified by an overall linear narrative, where the game-rules within the game are deeply connected to the overall narratological progress of the game.

FFX is the game that has the most obvious religious narrative of the two games chosen. The game is set in a fictitious world where the past and present is reversed in comparison to the real world. In the past, technology existed and blossomed. In the present, the world is more primitive, and technology is distanced. The player plays as *Tidus,* a person who survives the destruction of his city by a monstrous creature called *Sin*, thousand years prior to the current events of the game. He is teleported into the present, and is placed in a world that is still ravaged by *Sin*, where technology is seen as the origin of *Sin's* terror. The world's status quo is filled with religion that works as a guideline for how to temporarily defeat Sin, and how people can live their lives in order to not make the same mistakes as their ancestors, such as prohibiting the use of machines. It becomes *Tidus'* task to eliminate *Sin* permanently and end the thousand-year-old cycle. It is linear, with the exception of certain elements of the game, and places the religious narrative as a core element of the story. Although its setting is fictitious, it still shows influences, notions and symbolism of religion from the real world. I will explain this further in the analysis chapter.

[Figure 1.2: Official cover of Bloodborne GOTY Edition PS4]

Bloodborne is a game created by the game-development company *FromSoftware* and published by *Bandai Namco* in March 2015, developed exclusively for the *PlayStation 4*. In November 2015, the *The Old Hunters DLC* (downloadable content) was added with new areas, enemies and weapons for the player to discover. Although being the first in its installment, it is influenced by its perhaps more famous predecessor franchise *Dark Souls 1, 2 and 3* (2011, 2014, 2016), created by the same developers. *Bloodborne* is acclaimed to be a challenging and unforgiving game, rich with lore, semiotics and symbolism, resulting in a cult following and a high review score of 9.1/10 from *IGN.com*, and 92 out of 100 by *Metacritic*. It has sold over two million copies worldwide. *Bloodborne's* non-linear and action-based gameplay identifies it as an action role-playing game. Action role-playing games, *or aRPGs* for short, are known for their linear, but yet free narratological structure, allowing the player to explore, invest and enrich themselves outside of the main-narrative of the game's design.

In comparison to *FFX, Bloodborne's* immanent religious narrative is more hidden, and requires more immersion from the interpreter. *Bloodborne* is set in a Victorian influenced world, which is inhabited by mysterious horrors and beings in a city which is obsessed with acquiring knowledge about these creatures. Unlike *FFX*, the player does not play a predefined character. The state of *Bloodborne* is a dystopian world; ravaged by beasts and horrors. It

becomes the player's task to unveil the reasoning behind this scourge and explore what hides beneath the world of *Bloodborne.*

What makes this game unique in its design is the way the narrative is told. While *FFX* is straightforward and easy to follow in terms of its storytelling, *Bloodborne* is hard, and requires the player to indulge and immerse themselves into the narrative. To compare, when I first played through *Bloodborne*, I only experienced 1/3 of the game's content, using about 25-30 hours to complete it. In my second playthrough, which was much more thorough, I invested about 60-70 hours to complete most of the game's optional quests, sub-plots and areas. Because of its design it allows me as an interpreter to play a significant role in how it is perceived, for better and for worse. The game carries similarities to the Dark Souls franchise, using the same narratological and ludological design.

So how does the material from *Final Fantasy X* and *Bloodborne* compare to other types of studies of videogames and religion on an academic level? Games like BioShock Infinite and Mass Effect have been addressed as games that carry religious notions. Most prominent is BioShock Infinite's setting and obvious critique of American-Christian fundamentalism in the early 1900s (Bosman 2014, 2017), and looking at how *Mass Effect* confronts religion in its science-fiction universe, which is portrayed as a secular universe, even though it carries semiotics and religious symbolism (Irizarry, Irizarry 2014). These papers address how videogames contribute to the field of religious studies. I contribute to the same field, but in a different manner. Whereas the studies on *BioShock Infinite* addresses how gamers reacted to the religious narrative and explains how the game implements these elements into the ludology and narratology of the game, and the studies on *Mass Effect* look at how the trilogy implements religious semiotics and how it directly or indirectly affects the players of the franchise, I focus on how the games' immanent religious narrative contributes to modern religious critique from a philosophical perspective. While other studies often focus on other players, my approach intends to take advantage of my own personal experience as a gamer, as well as my competence regarding religious studies.

2.2   Establishing the material

When I first started to look at my material, I had to decide how to approach the games to gain the most efficiency when analyzing the games. Both *Bloodborne* and *FFX* are games that I

have played previously, and know the general narrative of. This gave me an idea of where to look when I replayed the games more in-depth. In the early phases of the research I began looking at *FFX* as I knew where to look more so than in *Bloodborne*. I documented everything relating to religion or religious symbolism while playing the games. I looked up videos on YouTube, searched on forums and wiki-pages exclusive to those games in order to get perspectives that I otherwise would not be able to find by myself. Most of this, although useful at the time, proved to be not exactly what I was looking for. However, it did prove that I was on the right track regarding my suspicions. I had to look at other studies of videogames and how they approached the games, such as the use of terminologies and theoretical framework. Looking at my own perception of the game and how it uses symbolism and elements of religion is not enough to state that a game carries immanent religion or religious critique.

To gain in-depth perception of the game's immanent religious narrative, I have to divide the analysis into three different levels, by using the theoretical framework provided by Bogost (2010), Šisler (2016) and Latorre (2015). I divided the games through segments, which I refer to as the player/character, game world and game activities (Latorre 2015). These three categories specify the areas of the game that I want to explore, and by dividing into these three different segments, it will be easier to organize the analysis. In order to make the analysis comprehensible in its structure, it is crucial that I differ between the narratological and ludological design. This is to not confuse myself and the reader with terminologies that we only find in the ludological design of the videogame or vice versa. By first looking at the narratological design, it is easier to understand the main narrative, which includes characters and game world entities. From there it will be easier to explain the ludological design, as it makes more sense when put into a narratological context.

When I started to play the games, I had already acquired knowledge of their narrative and gameplay from previous playthroughs. As mentioned earlier, I already had a slight idea of where to look. However, I had never looked at the games from an academic perspective, making the upcoming playthroughs more in-depth than I had earlier experienced them. On a general level, I first started taking notes, inserting quotes that I found either relevant or interesting enough to perhaps contribute to my research. I tried to systematically note down things in the game that could potentially either add to the player/character section, game world section or game activities section. I added bullet points to each character I either

remembered or came across, both significant and insignificant characters to the overall narrative of the game. The idea was to see if any of these, regardless of their role of the main narrative, could contribute to the immanent religious narrative in the game.

The same method was used when looking at elements, entities and areas that I as the player could encounter in the game world. First and foremost, I was looking at how things added to the main narrative of the game, and how this contributed to the immanent religion in the games. I also looked at things that did not necessarily contribute to the main narrative, but rather elements in the game world that could be seen as optional, yet important to the immanent religion. This is particularly notable with *Bloodborne*, as close to 70-80% of the game's content can be missed if the player does not thoroughly explore the game.

I took notes in terms of game activities. Game activities contributes to how the player is immersed with the game world. Being immersed in a videogame is when players indulge themselves into the game world, allowing themselves to be mentally invested in the game. The actions done in the game, everything from exploration, combat, puzzle-solving and so forth, can potentially add to how the narrative is implemented in the game. As game activities are the base form of how videogames express their participatory nature, it is important to note that not everything might add to my field of research. However, if they do, they might be the catalyst in terms of answering the research question, as they potentially enforce and strengthen the answers of the research question. Looking at the game activities in relation to not only the ludological, but also narratological context might enhance the immersion of the player and the narrative, creating new ways to look at the game.

2.3   Role as a researcher

When I started to research this thesis, I approached it with an insider's perspective. This is because I have been playing videogames for the last two decades, and as a result, I am familiar with how videogames are structured, played and interacted with. I have been playing videogames from the age of five, back in 1996, and since then been immersed into the various game worlds I have encountered. In other words, I take advantage of my familiarity to the empirical material to gain perspective otherwise impossible for an 'outsider':

> Insider research refers to when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members (Kanuha, 2000) so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with

the study participants (Asselin, 2003) […] This insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants (Dwyer, Buckle 2009: 58).

This can be translated into the field of videogames. Videogames are an intricate and complex medium that requires the participant to be familiar with the medium, making an outsider approach difficult to perform. Doing an insider-approach allows a more rapid and less difficult way of acquiring the information needed to answer the research question.

Considering myself a gamer is not unlike other researchers who has been conducting research regarding videogames. Bainbridge (2018), Bogost (2010) and Grieve (2018) all mention their relationship with videogames in accordance to their research. It becomes a necessity to familiarize oneself with a virtual world where the participant in reality does not possess any form for knowledge about the specified virtual world. "The other preliminary step is to become somewhat familiar about the particular virtual world, or even to consider several games to select the best one for the particular project" (Bainbridge 2018: 68). Bogost mentions himself an academic videogame researcher, as well as a videogame designer (Bogost 2010: x), creating a transparent role to his analysis and his role as a consumer of videogames. Grieve, in his ethnographic approach, mentions his participation as an observer of the online virtual world of *Second Life* (2003) (Grieve 2018: 54) taking notes while playing as well as when he signed off. The role as a player of the games is crucial and is what makes videogames a difficult medium to study:

> To provide a formal analysis, one needs to play a game carefully and repeatedly to distinguish primitives in the game and, later on, the principles of design. It is important to play the game multiple times and try different things. (Lankoski, and Björk 2015: 26) (Šisler 2018: 137).

It becomes apparent that being familiar with the videogames and approaching them with knowledge of their content is necessary to analyze them. Much like these researchers, I too had to play the games several times, even though I had played the games before, prior to writing this thesis.

When approaching the methods used in this thesis, there is need to take account for the possible challenges that might occur with the familiarity that I possess of the material. "Being an insider might raise issues of undue influence of the researcher's perspective…" (Dwyer, Buckle 2009: 59). As a researcher, it can be difficult to approach the material as an observer, rather than an insider. My position is first and foremost a strength, it is also a need to

defamiliarize myself with the empirical material. This is mainly to be able to gain a new perspective where I can acquire new information regarding the games I am analyzing.

> The art of producing breakdowns in settings only too familiar is not easy to master. The more familiar setting, the fewer breakdowns. It is facilitated by a rich and generative kind of empirical material, plenty of time to consider what it means and access to a broad set of different resources – theories, vocabularies, experiences – to challenge self-evident forms of understanding (Alvesson 2003: 185)

As Alvesson suggests, I also noticed an increased difficulty at distancing myself from the material, as I felt familiar with both games. Breaking them down by myself proved close to impossible, as I initially had no idea where to start. My proximity to the games allowed me to create expectations of the information gathered from the material, but it did not allow me to create breakdowns of the games and structure the analysis. The familiarity, although useful, also proved to be a challenge. To create these breakdowns, I decided to look at earlier research regarding videogames. Looking at earlier research gave me the opportunity to step away from the comfort zone of the insider-position and allow myself to look at the games from not a gamer's perspective, but an academic's. The theoretical framework I utilize in my analysis was initially an entirely new perspective on videogames to me, allowing me to distance myself from the empirical material.

> "[…] to build up an interpretive repertoire sufficiently broad in order to read empirical material in a variety of ways, thereby considering and perhaps developing themes not too closely tied to one's personal-political tastes" (Alvesson 2003: 186).

The idea is for me to break out of my preunderstanding of videogames, and use the theories of Bogost (2010), Šisler (2016) and Latorre (2015) to shake up my initial interpretations of the empirical material. Using theoretical framework previously unknown to me allows me to look at *Bloodborne* and *FFX* from a new perspective, allowing me to defamiliarize myself with the games.

The position as an insider has given me an opportunity to look at a field of study that would otherwise prove to be a long and difficult task to perform by an outsider. The familiarity with the design of the games and their narrative has proved to be a strength, but also a challenge. The challenge is not the initial knowledge of the empirical material, but rather to gain new information from it.

A self-ethnography is a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access", is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher then works and/or lives in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes. This research, however, is not a major preoccupation, apart from at a particular time when the empirical material is targeted for a close scrutiny and writing (Alvesson 2003: 174).

Although this thesis is not a self-ethnographic approach, the points made by Alvesson resembles that of self-ethnography. Where the outsider's work is to familiarize oneself with the empirical material, the insider's work is to defamiliarize and distance oneself enough for the researcher to acquire newfound knowledge that would initially be inaccessible from the insider's perspective.

2.4   Analytical strategy

When performing an analysis, it is important that the presentation of the analysis is done in a systematic and structured fashion. Particularly with videogames and their expression through text and audiovisual rhetorics, as well as its interactive nature, it becomes a necessity to divide the analysis into three separate sections. Using the work of Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) and Alvesson (2003), I have created this figure:
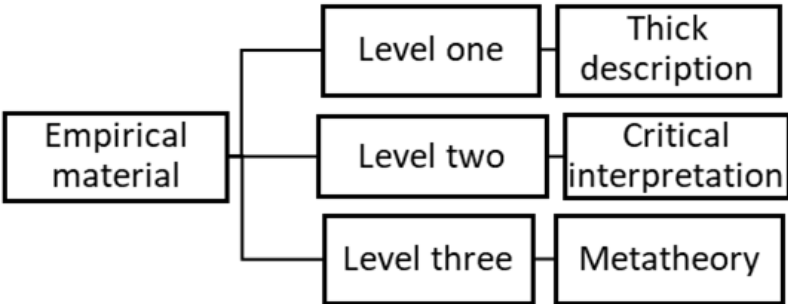
[Figure 2.1]

This figure shows how I will section the empirical material when analyzing them. The intention is to make the analysis transparent, not only for readers familiar with the medium of videogames, but also for readers which are not familiar with it. The idea of the first level of

the analysis is to apply a thick description, where the empirical material will be presented in an informative and revealing way (Alvesson 2003: 183).

The thick descriptions functions as a guide to the second level of the analysis, where critical interpretation will take place (Alvesson, Sköldberg 2009: 273). As Alvesson and Sköldberg explain it, there is a need to emphasize what will be interpreted; "The repertoire of interpretations means that certain interpretations are given priority, that others are possible but are not so readily emphasized" (Alvesson, Sköldberg 2009: 273). This means that the critical interpretation is narrowed down to answering the research question, while acknowledging the empirical material's possibility for other interpretations.

The third level is the metatheory which is in this case the philosophical religious critique:

> Metatheory, which to us means primarily critical theory and postmodernism (although one can imagine other variants), does not only encourage reflection; it also, in two ways, promotes creativity at the interface between the empirical material and its interpretation. The first is by asking questions about what lies behind the initial, self-evident interpretations that the researcher sometimes automatically produces […] Secondly, metatheories provide alternative points of departure for thinking about what the empirical material produces (Alvesson, Sköldberg 2009: 276).

The metatheory functions to look at videogames differently outside of the self-evident discoveries made from level one and level two of the analysis. The analysis will consist of going back and forth regarding the first (thick description) and second level (critical interpretation), from the narratological and ludological design and finally looking at the third level (metatheory):
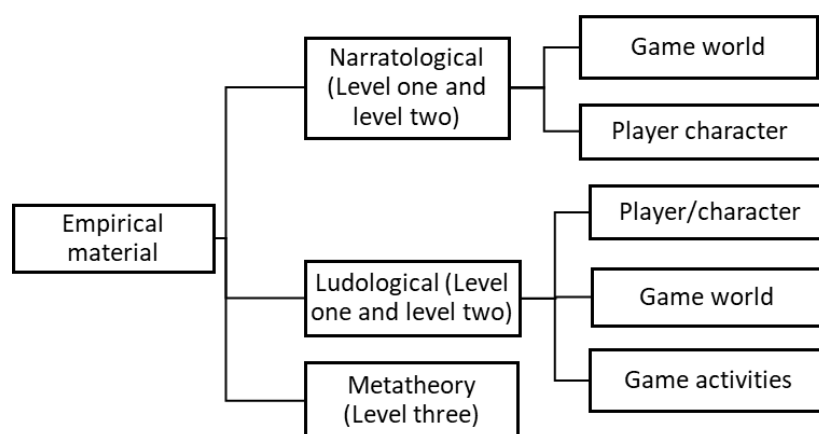
[Figure 2.2]

3 Theory

Throughout this chapter, I will explain the theoretical framework used in this analysis. The concepts here are based on and influenced by older traditions of academia. However, they are created and altered to correspond better to a modern context, where older discourses of rhetoric, religion, narrative and ludology might cause a conflict of interest or even contradict certain aspects of computation and older traditions of discourse. I will present the works of Šisler, Bogost and Latorre and how I will use their concepts in order to answer how the immanent religious narrative in videogames can resemble elements known from the modern tradition of philosophical religious critique.

3.1   Procedural rhetoric

Ian Bogost in his work *Persuasive Games* (2010) explains that videogames are an expressive medium, and as such, they "represent how real and imagined systems work" (Bogost 2010: vii). According to Bogost, it is fundamentally important to understand how videogames work as a field of representation. One must understand how videogames construct and criticizes various representations of our world through the interaction between player and videogame, as well as the constructed rule-systems that are applied to the genre of videogames or computation in general.

While videogames can be compared to other mediums of popular culture, like film, books, comics etc., it is difficult to do an in-depth research from a comparative perspective, because videogames in themselves are so unique in their participatory nature, unlike other types of pop-culture. A board game like *Monopoly* is more comparable in sense of the rule-systems that the players interact with, but yet resembles the rhetorical aspect that we find in movies for instance. It is argued by Bogost that videogames need to be analyzed through other means:

> Drawing on the 2,500-year history of rhetoric, the study of persuasive expression, I offer a general approach to how rhetoric functions uniquely in software in general and videogames in particular (Bogost 2010: viii).

Bogost argues that rhetoric alone is lackluster when it comes to analyzing games, but the various categories, such as visual rhetoric and digital rhetoric will help in mapping and

understanding the concept of the art of persuasion in videogames and brings up the concept of procedural rhetoric:

Following these traditions, this book suggests that videogames open a new domain for persuasion, thanks to their core representational mode, procedurality. I call this new form procedural rhetoric, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. This type of persuasion is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations (Bogost 2010: ix).

By integrating the idea of *procedurality* and *rhetoric* Bogost introduces a new way of looking at how videogames uniquely express themselves, not just as computer-based mediums, but also in terms of cultural mediums, where games play more of a role in social and cultural positions (Bogost 2010: ix). Bogost look at the different concepts of rhetoric and procedurality, and how they correspond to videogames and the concept of *procedural rhetoric*.

First, Bogost introduces the idea of *procedurality*, by explaining the idea of a rule-based system, and how it interacts with the user through different outcomes. Regardless of the genre of *procedural media* the concept of procedurality is always there. The way a game processes a certain structure, being a moral process, an educational process, or even a more mechanical process like how a certain thing works inside the game for instance, is all part of the what Bogost categorizes as procedurality:

> *Procedurality* refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high school to conceptual systems like religious faith. Rhetoric refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively (Bogost 2010: 2-3).

Bogost argues that this is a vital part of understanding the concept and construct of videogames, but also acknowledges the fact that the terms procedurality and rhetoric "can impose ambiguity and confusion" (Bogost 2010: 3), and therefore goes in-depth as to what the origin of the concepts are.

There are several ways of looking at procedurality, and the way to define it is directly tied to its context. The general statement is that procedures are directly linked to authority, and is

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often perceived as fixed and unchangeable. This goes with procedures tied to law, ideology, and also computer-science. The main difference between the different views of procedure, and in particular computer-scientific approach, is the "emphasis on the expressive capacity afforded by rules of execution" (Bogost 2010: 5). While laws and ideology follow a protocol, a procedure that is fixed and clouds the arena of interpretation, the systems that computational procedurality often creates is an arena for interpreting its processes in relation to processes in the "material world" (Bogost 2010: 5). This forms an area of expression that other varieties of procedurality would not underline in the same way that computational procedurality does. The idea of computation as a form of representation creates a role for the interpreter, and the expression that is produced is a direct connection between this representation and its interpreter. This is what Bogost refers to as *procedural representation*.

"[...] procedural representation takes a different form than written or spoken representation. Procedural representation explains *processes with other processes*" (Bogost 2010: 9). The basic idea is that this form of representation creates expression and representation, not through language, but as a form of symbolic expression. This is tied to the notion of videogames and procedural rhetoric. To understand the videogame and its analysis it is fundamental to understand the rules of the game and its processes, and how they are expressed through symbolic means.
"*Procedural representation itself* requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely describe them" (Bogost 2010: 9). The notion of the videogames is to understand the various areas of procedural representation. One vital form of procedural representation is human interpretation and behavior. By executing the rules given to us, we enact them by acting according to the rules we have been given. Just by following the rules of a board-game, and executing its rules, we produce a form of procedural representation of that game and its rules, without describing them through language, but by enacting them. Looking at the videogames' immanent religious narrative, it can be noticed that the religious ideas, concepts and influences are enacted and creates the procedural representation in the game that expressed in the narrative.

There are three categories that can be tied into the concept of procedural rhetoric, which are *classic rhetoric*, *visual rhetoric* and *digital rhetoric* - three ways of expression through different techniques. Rhetoric is based on an oratory technique, where the idea was to coerce and persuade the listener, often following a structure of introduction, evidence, and falsifying

and/or troubleshoot the evidence to make sure that the rhetorical approach carried weight and purpose. Throughout the development of rhetorical technique, the idea was that rhetoric is exclusive through verbal means. This is what is categorized as classic rhetoric and builds on the philosophies of Ancient Greece and their theories behind persuasion and communication. "Effectively, rhetoric was extended to account for new modes of inscription – especially literary and artistic modes. Rhetoric in writing, painting, sculpture, and other media do not necessarily make the same direct appeals to persuasion as oratory" (Bogost 2010: 19).

This leads to the concept of visual and digital rhetoric as new concepts in the art of persuasion. These two new concepts have been created in the shadow of globalization, where the idea of mass media, such as pictures, news, television plays an entirely new role in terms of expressing and persuading, creating visual images, that is not necessarily connected to language and the verbal aspect of rhetorics:

> Rhetoricians working from a variety of disciplinary perspectives are beginning to pay a substantial amount of attention to issues of visual rhetoric. Through analysis of photographs and drawings, graphs and tables, and motion pictures, scholars are exploring the many ways in which visual elements are used to influence people's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs (Bogost 2010: 21)

The notion of visual rhetoric is to persuade in a different way than classic rhetoric does. According to Bogost and Charles A. Hill (Bogost 2010: 22), images expresses itself more vividly than text or speech does, which prompts to what Hill refers to as "visceral responses" from the interpreter. These images produce expression and can persuade without the need pf language or verbal communication. Although visual rhetoric does not describe processes, it still provides a useful insight as to how the interpreter can respond to images through new medium. As Bogost states it; "Image is subordinate to process" (Bogost 2010: 25) and as such does not explore procedural representation in the context of videogames. It rather gives elements and aspects that are worth being aware of and explore in the context of procedural rhetoric and videogame analysis.

Digital rhetoric in comparison to visual rhetoric puts focus on computers and what kind of text and speech it creates through its different aspects. It embraces the idea of verbal rhetoric in the context of the digital world. Bogost narrows down the digital rhetoric to how the content of digital media is used and produced. "...like visual rhetoricians, digital rhetoricians hope to revive and reinvent rhetorical theory for a new medium (Bogost 2010: 25). Digital media, such as emails, wikis, websites and blogs are all a part of the category of digital

rhetoric. The main focus of digital rhetoric is to transfer and reconfigure classic rhetoric into the digital medium, such as wikis replacing lexicons, websites are replacing newspapers etc. What digital rhetoric fails to address is its procedurality of computation (Bogost 2010: 26), and as a result fails to develop a new rhetorical discourse, where it does not properly address the unique abilities of the digital medium. Just like visual rhetoric is lacking in its ability to define the processes of videogames, so does the digital rhetoric. Hence Bogost introduces the concept of *procedural rhetoric*.

Procedural rhetoric, simply put, is a hybrid between visual, digital and classic rhetoric. Whereas digital, visual and classic rhetoric does not correspond well to the expressive medium of videogames by themselves, the purpose of procedural rhetoric is to highlight the aspects other rhetorical discourses are lacking, by underlining the unique ability of videogames and computers as rule-systems to persuade and express itself through processes and procedurality. Bogost states the function of procedural rhetoric as follows:

> Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion – to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression – to convey ideas effectively. Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming (Bogost 2010: 29).

Videogames are a part of that computation. By using the theory of procedural rhetoric, the various rhetorical aspects of videogames can be analyzed by looking at the processes and the rule-systems of the videogames. These processes can be described and explained, not only through verbal means, but also through visual means.

Procedural rhetoric, as previously mentioned, often requires an interaction between the interpreter and the medium that is interpreted. Videogames are no different, and in all cases, there is a procedural representation going on between the mediator and the videogame. However, there is a need to be specific about what this interaction actually contains: "Procedural representation is representation, and thus certainly not identical with actual experience. However, procedural representation can muster moving images and sound..." (Bogost 2010: 35). The images and the sound mustered by the representation must be interacted by a user to create any sort of expression. This is what Bogost refers to as procedural rhetoric's *participatory nature* (Bogost 2010: 42). The whole concept of

participation is to create a procedural environment, an environment that is responsive to the user's behavior. This can be fairly complex, depending on how to define this sort of interactivity. In a computational context this interactivity can be as simple as clicking on a website link, and a new window opens on the computer screen.

It can also be more complex: Videogames are a good example of a more complex aspect of this interactivity. Most videogames have a rule-system that is often more complex than clicking on a website link, and often interacts with the user on a deeper level of interaction. "This is really what we do when we *play* videogames: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game's controls" (Bogost 2010: 43). Often games are referred to as either "hard to play" or "easy to play". In a procedural rhetorical context, this aims at the difficulty of the processes within the game and how hard it is for the player to understand the processes, and finding the parameters that the game has set up via its rule-system. This brings us further to the function of the player/user's role in procedural rhetoric. Through the procedural rhetorics the *interpreter* is affected in the virtual world, and in the outside world. This is what Bogost refers to as "persuasive games" (Bogost 2011: 47) – The ability for the player to change opinion outside the virtual reality of the game. The function is to fill the gap between "subjectivity and game processes" (Bogost 2010: 43). Bogost calls this the *simulation gap*. This gap is what creates the unique participatory nature of videogames, as it intrigues and persuades the interpreter to interact within its parameters.

Due to its interactive ability, videogames are perhaps the most expressive form of medium within the computational category. Unlike the general idea of procedural representation and procedural rhetoric in other sorts of media, videogames are fundamentally dependent on user interaction to express themselves and "to complete their procedural representation" (Bogost 2010: 45). The level of interactivity, however, varies from game to game, and it is vital to set up the stage for both "expression and meaningful persuasion". The word *immersive* and *immersion* plays a big part in the concept of videogames. The videogames that create the most interactivity are often referred to as the most immersive ones and produce more expression than other, less interactive games. This sort of expression also potentially produces meaning in the videogame. Bogost describes the meaning-making in videogames:

> But meaning in videogames is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world. Procedural representation models only some

subset of a source system in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of representation (Bogost 2010: 46).

This is the concept of "virtual world versus real world". Videogames never represent the actual world, but rather represent ideas and concepts similar to the real world. A videogame creates its own virtual reality that the player interacts through, and through the *simulation gap* mentioned earlier, meaning and expression is produced. This indicates that by looking at the immanent religious narrative, we are not looking for *real* religions, but rather ideas and influences from the real world that create the in-game religious narrative.

The question that lies within videogames at this point is the seriousness of the games and the relationship between play and seriousness. "Interrogating the relationship between seriousness and play is nothing new" (Bogost 2010: 54). In other words; how can videogames, an interactive media, where the fundamental concept is to "play" be regarded into the category of "seriousness"? According to Bogost, it is defined through how to interpret the word *serious:* "Serious is a word with many meanings, and it should no longer be sufficient merely to oppose it to entertainment..." (Bogost 2010: 56).
Hence it is crucial to define, and to map the various meanings of the word. Seriousness can imply the concept of consequences, severity or profundity. Although we are "playing" videogames, it is important to note that games can still carry deeper expression through the rule-system that the player is enforced to partake in to proceed within the game's parameters. All of these concepts of the word 'serious' can be found in videogames depending on the game's narrative, procedurality and genre. "The notion of serious as the underlying structure of a system is particularly compatible with the concept of procedurality" (Bogost 2010: 58). In other words, videogames as "serious" is potentially a potent field regarding procedural rhetoric, and it is vital to not disregard videogames as solely for play, but also as a research field, where discoveries can be made by looking at the videogames from an academical point of view, as well as a player.

"[...] procedural rhetoric is not automatically a part of computational expression, and a great deal of attention is required to construct coherent – let alone effective – procedural rhetorics" (Bogost 2010: 64). Although games are a part of that computational expression, it is also clear, according to Bogost, that the concept of procedural rhetoric is not exclusive to this, and

can be found in several fields. This includes fields like the ones Bogost focuses on; politics, advertising and education, but can also include other fields like, social discourse and religious discourse, as Vit Šisler (2016) and Óliver Pérez Latorre (2015) emphasize in their case studies regarding videogames. With Bogost's theories, videogames are now more understandable as a medium in terms of how to interpret them. However, for me to be able to answer my research question, regarding videogames' immanent religious narrative, I will have to understand exactly how these cultural influences are integrated into videogames. This is what we call procedural religion, which I will cover in the next section.

3.2   Procedural religion

Vit Šisler's article uses the theories of procedural rhetoric, expressive and persuasive games from Bogost (2010). "Procedural Religion: Methodological reflections on studying religion in video games" (2016) builds on these theories, and introduces the concept of *procedural religion*. The goal of Šisler is to present the different methodological aspects of studying religion within videogames, and how they are perceived through the rule-system of videogames as mentioned earlier.

As Bogost mentioned, the idea of procedural rhetoric is that it introduces a field that creates room to interpret various aspects of rule-systems within computation and other rule-based systems that build on interaction with the user. The article focuses on using case study as a method to provide the necessary data to understand the games Age of Empires II and Quraish as rule-based systems and their relation to culture and influence:

> By comparing the rule-systems of both games, the article provides empirical evidence on how game rule-systems migrate between cultures and influence local game production by providing local game developers with pre-defined formulas for expressing their ideas while simultaneously limiting the scope of such expression with schematized patterns. On a more general level, the article discusses what rule-system analysis can tell us about video games as cultural and religious artifacts (Šisler 2016: 126).

Šisler follows Bogost's pattern and uses the ideas of procedurality and procedural representation to create a case study, mainly to show how much of society and other social and cultural concepts can be represented in videogames. "Video games pervade much of society, regardless of age or gender, and open new forms of representation" (Šisler 2016: 127). These representations are created through what the videogames wants to persuade and express through their procedural rhetorics. Šisler points out explicitly how videogames with

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religious content has made it on the market in the recent years, where game developers are using mythologies, beliefs and other religious representations to influence their narrative, as well as their procedurality within the videogames' rule-systems. "As a consequence, games can reflect, reject, or reconfigure religious ideas and are a source for the production of religious practices and ideas in modernity (Geraci, 2012)" (Šisler 2016: 127). This is what Šisler bases his work on; the usage of religion as a part of the procedural rhetoric in videogames.

"The study of religion and gaming has not received much attention in the study of religion and media" (Šisler 2016: 127). Researchers states that videogames can be used as an "important space for exploring the intersection between religion and contemporary culture" (Šisler 2016: 127). In light of modern culture, videogames introduce a new way of representing the religious world and can play an essential part in expressing these new ways of representation. In other words, what is needed is to understand how religion and religious content in videogames is created through the rule-system and the procedurality of videogames:

> Video games have properties that precede their content: games are models of experience rather than textual descriptions or visual depictions (Bogost 2011: 4). When we play games, we operate those models with our actions constrained by their rules. When analyzing how religion is represented in video games, we also have to investigate critically the ways in which religion is (or is not) embedded in the rule-systems of video games; in other words, how religion functions on the games' "procedural level" (Šisler 2016: 127)

By using the theory of procedural rhetoric and integrating its principles within the religious representations in videogames, we can look at religious content in-game by using the games' rule-systems to describe and explain the ways the games express its procedural religion.

When it comes to analyzing videogames, there are certain concepts that are created to fit into the way videogames work. Procedural rhetoric is a term created to fit the expressive medium of computers and computation. The same applies to the terms *narratological* and *ludological*; created and defined to fit into videogame analysis. These two terms define how to look at videogames; looking at it from a narratological perspective introduces videogames as a novel form, and its meaning and expression should be looked at from a narrative's perspective, using theories of narrative as a form of procedure in the analysis (Šisler 2016: 128). On the other hand, ludological means to look at videogames in terms of their rule-systems. By analyzing

the rule-systems and the representations these systems create, the studies of videogames introduce a separate category and "involve analyses of the abstract and formal systems they describe" (Šisler 2016: 128). These terms do not, however, exclude one another, and looking at videogames through a ludological perspective does not necessarily reject the studies of the narratological perspective and vice versa. In order to define the immanent religious narrative of a videogame, it is crucial to take use of both, as the narrative can be expressed not just through the narrative, but also through the means of playing and interacting with the game world from a ludological perspective.

Šisler, in his article, mainly bases his research on the ludological perspective and ludic design of the videogames' he is analyzing, where the narrative and story of the game does not play a big part in his analysis. He focuses only on the rule-systems in the videogames and how they convey and represent religion through procedurality. It is worth noting that Šisler focuses on what type of religion the games are representing through their virtual world versus the real world, whereas my thesis will focus on religious ideas and concepts that create the immanent religious narrative in a videogame. Šisler uses as a result the definition of games from Jesper Juul (2003):

> A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Šisler 2016: 129)

It is important to note what Juul's definition of games indicates. His definition of games is purely from a ludological point of view. Games are from his perspective systems with quantifiable outcomes, and as a result, does not consider the audiovisual or digital representation that also is a vital part of videogames. From a narratological perspective, this definition is therefore lackluster, and does not correspond well to the theories of narrative. There are however other ways to define videogames, where the definition highlights the videogames unique ability to create representation and expressions through the interaction between the player, the game and the game-world.

As mentioned, Šisler further builds on Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric. It is a concept created to correspond to the different aspects of videogames, and focuses on procedural representations through images, audio and text. In the same way, procedural religion introduces a concept of how to analyze and discuss procedural rhetoric through religious

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videogames (Šisler 2016: 130). Šisler criticizes Bogost for being very vague in his definition of procedural religion, and therefore applies new methods to define what it means to study religion within videogames. Approaches like comparing mainstream videogames to more Christian games that are meant to convert or persuade the user, or to look at videogames as a medium to define the procedural representation of religions in the real world, are examples seen in this field of research. The issue is however that these approaches do not introduce any concrete ways of defining the function of procedural religion. It therefore allows various interpretations, in which Šisler attempts to fill this gap. "This article aims to fill this void and provide an example of a formally defined method for the description and analysis of procedural religion" (Šisler 2016: 130).

Looking at the case study and the structure of the case study will help map the uncharted area which is procedural religion. By looking at the procedural rhetoric and procedural representations that *Age of Empires II* and *Quraish*, Šisler defines how religious elements, and religion as a function works within the games' rules and parameters.
Using Šisler's example of *Age of Empires II,* he states the rules of the game and its parameters as a strategy game set in the European medieval era. By analyzing the procedural representation of religion within the game by using an empirical approach, he explains the functions of religion within the game's rule-system. In the game, religion is represented in both narrative and audiovisual means, but it can also be interacted with by the player, where the rules and parameters are set to give the player bonuses in completing set tasks within the game. The game creates a representation of Christianity, and using elements within Christianity to build on this representation.
The same goes with *Quraish*; a strategy game like *Age of Empires II*. Within its rule-system the game creates a representation, a typified version of Islam within its context. "The game deals with the origin and spread of Islam. During particular missions, the players take part in many real, historical events and visit historical places like Mecca, Medina, or Jerusalem" (Šisler 2016: 132). Šisler continues explaining the function of this interaction: "...the authors aim to develop a deeper understanding of the broader geographical, social, and economic processes that determined the historical spread of Islam and to communicate Islamic moral and ethical values to the player". The reason I use these examples from Šisler, is to express the various ways of interpreting and analyzing videogames, and to express the important notion of videogames: The representations of real-world entities, like for instance Christianity or Islam, are typified versions of them, not an actual part of them.

The way Šisler proceeds when performing the analysis of *Age of Empires II* and *Quraish* is to reconstruct the game through stating the different rule-systems that are within the videogames. "[...] video games are not typically explained outside the "text" of the game – they have to be reconstructed through the process of playing that is through close reading of the game" (Šisler 2016: 135). In other words, an empirical approach is a necessity when it comes to analyzing videogames. Unlike other categories of games, like board-games, the rules are not explicitly stated when the game is played, and has to be experienced and interacted with by the player. As Bogost (2010) mentions, when we play videogames, we are exploring the parameters of the games, to understand where the rules limit us as players.

Looking at the procedural layer of videogames we can determine the different layers of whatever we are researching. If we go back to Šisler's case study, the layers of religion can be seen in the way the game processes through player interaction. "[...] religion in both games is essentially a database of effects, bonuses, and penalties in the procedural layer" (Šisler 2016: 135). Another issue that arises without the help of an empirical approach. By again looking at Šisler's case study, the games he performs an analysis of, are almost identical in terms of the rule-system and genre, yet there are two distinct religions being manifested in each of them; one being Islam (*Quraish*) and the other being Christianity (*Age of Empires II*).
By combining the audiovisual with the textual content can the games create a representation of the religions it attempts to depict within their rule-system. Through the experience and interaction with the player this depiction can become a representation within procedural religion. Most argue that this is the more normal form of religious representation within videogames. The issue with this however is that it creates a very "mechanized" form of the religious representation, making the rules within a religion fixed and unchangeable in the aspect of a videogame:

> The discrepancy between religion and a game's rule-system is further widened by the fact that religious rules are more organic and less mechanical than those of a video game. Religious guidelines and instructions are social, allow for reinterpretation, can be negotiated, and allow for mystery and acceptance of the unknown (Schut, 2014: 260) (Šisler 2016: 136)

Therefore, it is important to note that videogames are not exclusively based on rule-systems. There are also the elements of narrative, and the fiction of the game that creates the experience for the player, not just the "mechanized" rules within the game. Games that give the player moral and ethical choices, for instance, create a procedurality that requires the

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player to choose a moral standard to proceed in the games' narrative, and might change the narrative depending on the player's choice.

An important point that Šisler makes in his article is that the cultural influence is a fundamental part of the representations that are created in the videogames' rule-system and narrative. "The way different religions are represented in global video game production is fundamentally shaped by both local religious and cultural traditions, as well as the video game's rule-system used to convey such representation" (Šisler 2016: 138). For example, a game developed by Japanese developers can have a completely different representation of any social entity in comparison to a game developed by an American developer creating a representation of the very same aspect. It is therefore, according to Šisler, important to note the game's localization in terms of development to understand the game's influences and overall perspective when looking at the procedural rhetoric.

Another issue that occurs when analyzing games into Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric is the idea that the games themselves should be able to convey their meaning and expressions without the use of "texts" and "textual elements". "According to Möring, this is, by definition, not possible in video games, given that games necessarily contain some form of textual or, more broadly, semiotic elements" (Šisler 2016: 138). It is therefore better to use the concept of procedural rhetoric and procedurality as concepts in order to explain the game's overall structure and mechanics, and furthermore use these structures as templates for limiting the possible representations:

> Regarding our understanding of religion and digital gaming, it is of crucial importance to study not how video games' rule-systems represent religion but more precisely how they shape, afford, and limit the possible representations of the latter (Šisler 2016: 138).

In other words, when analyzing games, it is important to note the rule-system and the structure of the game. The game's development background, and its influences are also a crucial part about understanding the possible representations that can be seen in the game. These representations are seen both through the rule-systems of the games, but, as Šisler states, also through the audiovisual aspect of the game, as well as the textual elements. Being open to both the limitations, as well as the possibilities of persuasive games is an essential part about analyzing videogames:

Studying procedural religion not only illuminates new ways in which video games shape religious representations and practices in modernity, but situates such research within a wider discourse of how digital media intersect with the religious world of the 21st century" (Šisler 2016: 139).

What Šisler shows in his article is the importance of understanding the game's rule system, and how it plays out in terms of procedural religion. How religion is represented and manifested within videogames is more than just rule systems, and there is a necessity to highlight the player's role within this representation. In conclusion, empirical methods are essential to videogame analysis, yet the player's own experience in these representations are not mentioned in detail. He mentions little of how the explicit interaction between the game, the player and the game-world is played out in relation to these representations. In the next section, I will summarize the article of Óliver Pérez Latorre (2015) and his approach to videogame analysis. By looking more in-depth at the ludological structure of videogames, it will be easier to decipher both the narratological and ludological aspect of the videogame. As a result, it will be a more thorough research of exactly what the immanent religious narrative brings to the table regarding religious critique in videogames.

3.3   Ludological design of videogames

In "The Social Discourse of Video Game Analysis Model and Case Study: *GTA IV*" (2015) Latorre discusses three essential categories of videogame discourse: The representation of the *character/player, the game world* and the *game activities* within the game itself (Latorre 2015: 415). These three categories are essential in understanding how a videogame works, and are fundamental in terms of ludic design. Every videogame carries these three elements within them. Games with more narrative will perhaps focus more on the representation of the character and game world, while a game with more ludological design might highlight the game activities more than the game world. Regardless, these categories of videogames are tied together and create the interactive narrative that videogames possess.

Although Latorre performs a case study of *Grand Theft Auto IV* and social discourses within the game, I will mainly focus on his methodological approach, and summarize the use the various terminologies that he uses to explain the basic fundamentals and relationship between the player/character, game world and game activities, that I will use later on in my own analysis.

As both Bogost and Šisler have stated earlier, videogames as a field of research is extremely complicated regarding the methodological approach and the amount of expressions and representations that can be generated are immense. It all depends on what the game, its genre and its game mechanics consist of. While Bogost and Šisler's articles mention the procedural rhetoric and procedural representations of the game, Latorre puts more focus on the new, unique 'language' videogames bring to the table in terms of expression:

> The expressive dimension in video games contains, among others, elements of verbal language, audiovisual language and narrative structures, but video games transmit meaning essentially through a distinctive language of their own: the language of ludic design, that is, the game rule design and the ludic interactive dynamics (Latorre 2015: 416).

We can connect this language to the procedurality of videogames. The way videogames express themselves through procedures in terms of the rule-system within the game and the interaction between the rule-system and the player, videogames create their own, unique way of expression and persuasion.

Latorre starts his article introducing the origin of videogame analysis and to the concept of *ludology*. When games first started being analyzed, the main idea was to look at the design of the game, and its structures. This is how the term 'ludology' was coined. Since then, the analysis of videogames has evolved, as we have seen with both Šisler and Bogost, where clearly other dimensions of structures within the videogames are brought to attention. At first, introducing aspects of narratological and other elements of media studies was criticized, but over the years, the interest in this sort of approach has increased, designing the older theories to befit the structure of videogames altogether. By introducing this approach, the cultural influences of games are not neglected in the 'mechanized' trap of 'pure' ludological theory.

When looking at the social discourse of videogames, Latorre introduces us to an aspect that has not been covered in depth by Bogost or Šisler, which is *videogame cultural studies*:

> Following the footsteps of traditional cultural studies, video game cultural studies address two major research areas: (1) studies on representation and social discourse in popular video games in relation to issues such as the transmission of ideological values; gender discourses; reinforcement or deviation from social stereotypes; and questions of race, multiculturalism, and immigration and (2) studies on "active" reception modes in video games by certain sociocultural player profiles, for example, the reinterpretations of popular video games... (Latorre 2015: 418).

These studies also introduce the aspect of for instance social entities such as religion and religious representations within videogames, as Šisler discussed in his article. In relation to the idea of the three aspects of videogame discourse, by introducing the cultural studies, the interaction between the player and character, as well as the interaction between the player and game-world and game activities, suddenly creates a whole new dimension of meaning-making and expression.

Latorre goes into an in-depth explanation of the ludic design's relationship to the player/character, the game-world and the game activities and the meaning potential with each of them. Latorre first explains the ludic design of the player/character, and the rule-systems designed around this relationship between the player and character. The rules that are applied are divided into five categories of game rules: performance rules, operation rules, state rules and rules for inducing behaviors and game mechanics (Latorre 2015: 420). All these elements are what creates the overall connection between the player and the rule-system in the game.

"These *[performance] rules* define the possible actions of the character and the links between these actions and their effects or fundamental functions in the game" (Latorre 2015: 420). These rules are essential if the game wants to create expressions and meaning between the character and the player, and can often symbolize different social aspects that can be related to situations in the material world. By either giving the player freedom or by forcing the player to do certain actions through the performance rules, the game can potentially express and/or persuade the player into a certain line of thought or mentality when interacting with the game.

Operation rules define the connection of the player's action outside of the virtual reality to the actions within the game, and how they connect to one another. A simple example is how a player controls the character. By moving the joystick or one of the directional buttons on a keyboard, the character within the game moves, depending on the direction the player is aiming for. In a ludological design, by indicating for instance drug use by inverting the controls of the player, or make the character less responsive can create a more in-depth relation between the player's action in linkage to the character's.

State rules are the rules that define the state the character/player can find themselves in within the videogames' parameters. This is stated in the game's structure, like levels and sub-levels, but also through the state of the character's "health", "experience" and "lives". Depending on

the type of game and genre, the state rules may change, and play a role within discourses like religious or social discourse.

The rules for inducing behavior are the rules that create the limits and parameters within the game. "Some rules or combinations of rules fulfill the fundamental function of making the character/player behave in a certain way in the medium or long term" (Latorre 2015: 421). Typical examples of this are punishment by the player doing something that "violates" the rules, and the character ends up "dead".

The last category is *game mechanics*, and is the very core of the game experience. The game mechanics indicate the connection between the character and the player, and how the skill of the player is directly connected to the character's ability to reach the goals throughout the game. The actions performed by the character indicate the player's own skills which creates the basic fundamentals of the game mechanics. Overall these game mechanics can play a crucial role when it comes to create a representation of the character/player.

Latorre also divides the idea of ludic design in the game world with 5 categories: the spatiotemporal design, the rules of blocking/unblocking areas and states of the game-world, the game rules related to the design of the nonplayer states of the game and interactive objects of the game world and the possible relationship between the game rules and inducing player/character behavior in the game world (Latorre 2015: 422). The main function of the game world is to create an environment that the game takes place in, which has nonplayable-characters *(NPCs),* objects and cultural and natural elements to them. These categories will help understanding the design of these environments, and what kind of role they can play out in terms different discourses.

"In the *spatiotemporal analysis* of the game, apart from questions of visual and scenic design, special attention should be given to questions that substantially affect player interaction" (Latorre 2015: 422). Latorre differentiates two parts of the game world: active environments and reactive environments, and these two are often used to define the relation between the game environment and the player. Scenes that requires an interaction with the player is an active environment, while a reactive environment could be scenes that are less dependent on player interaction.

Rules of blocking/unblocking areas and states in the game world are the rules that define the parameters within the game. These are what is called in gaming "invisible walls"; a wall that directly blocks the character from proceeding in the environment of the game world, but neither the player nor character can see. It can also be something like a progression system, where the player has to gain experience by doing quests to unlock more skills and improve the character. This is to create a sense of progression, as well as limit the player from not progressing in the paths that the developers want the players to proceed in. This invokes the idea of procedurality, where the player interacts with the given rules, and explores the limits of those rules.

Patterns of behavior of nonplayer characters indicate how the game world's rules create various behaviors for the characters that are in the game. If a game has created moral and ethical rules, like stealing items that belong to the *NPC*, the game has been designed by rules that makes the *NPC* call out to the authorities for theft, and might start a fight with the player/character. By creating various *NPCs* with different behaviors within the rule-system can create various representations of discourse.

The rules that are based on the objects in the game world are tied to the same principles as non-playable character behavior. Depending on the game's rule-system, different objects might act differently to player interaction. A simple example of this is the connection between the player/character and a door. By approaching the door, and pressing a command, if the rule-system is designed around this, the door will open for the player, and the player/character can proceed through the door. By having doors that the player/character are not able to open is revolved back to the rules of blocking areas within the game-world. These rules can create various representations, as they might carry a narratological reason as to why a player can either interact or not with the object.

The last rules that are affiliated with the game world are *the rules that induce behavior*. The principle behind this is that all these rules that are mentioned regarding the game world do not only create representations of the player/character, but also the entire game world. This indicates ethical choices that might change the entire behavior of objects, non-playable characters etc.

Lastly, Latorre talks about "the ludic design of the game activities and its meaning potential" (Latorre 2015: 424). Latorre brings up the association between the game activities that the

player/character interacts with within the game world, and how it affects production of meaning and representation. These are not "rules", but principles, conditions and patterns that can be found within videogames. Patterns of action regarding final objectives, winning and losing conditions, degree of redundancy versus variability of the game play, game mechanics, chains of actions and strategical/tactical dilemmas (Latorre 2015: 424-426) are all different elements that can be found inside game activities.

Patterns of action regarding final objectives are the essence of creating meaning within the game through game activities. This directly connects to the actions performed by the player/character and how these actions tie up to the final objectives within the game. By making the player understand the rules of the game, and inducing behavior onto the player's actions, the player can reach the final objective through these rule-systems.

Winning and losing conditions are also directly tied to the final objectives of the game. By 'winning conditions' we indicate a preferred way of interacting within the game to receive a winnable outcome. Often by doing the 'correct' actions, the player can receive "winning conditions" by completing the final objective of the game. Losing conditions are however the opposite; actions that does not help the player achieve the goal of the game. Often these 'losing conditions' are indicated by "game over" screens and the result of the character's death within certain games.

Degree of redundancy versus variability of the game play focuses on the amount of actions that can be done to reach the objective or goal of the game or quest in the game. Some games indicate less freedom for the player, and require one action to proceed in the game, while others, namely the role-playing game genre, give the player more varied choices that can lead to the same outcome, or even at some point, different outcomes, depending on the player/character's actions.

Although *game mechanics* are also an essential part of the relation between the player/character and representation, game mechanics are such a vital part of videogames as a medium that they also are a category within the game activities. Games that focus on using game activities to create some sort of meaning or representation, are using what will be defined as game mechanics.

Chains of actions are another element in which videogames often use. The basic principle is that the process has a pre-defined rule-system in which the player proceeds using checkpoints. Completing task A, and then task B in succession may lead to a continuation of the narrative, while only doing task A, and not task B may lead to no continuation. "This kind of action design projects meaning through the construction of cause-effect relationships and/or the successive order of occurrences that, depending on the design, lead to a particular ending" (Latorre 2015: 426).

Strategic/tactical dilemmas is perhaps one of the most essential categories regarding more modern games in terms of ludic design:

> Essentially, ludic strategy is an overall plan of action linked to a certain objective that involves the player making a decision (there is at least one other alternative possibility) and is characterized by a specific articulation of "opportunities and risks" or "advantages or disadvantages" (Latorre 2015: 426).

Games that often present several possibilities, or just Option A and Option B often use this concept of dilemma to create tension and decision-making for the player. It is also often used to create a representation of moral and ethical standards within the game. This is often seen in more modern role-playing games, where the essential part of the game is to give the player "freedom" inside the game's parameters.

Through this model of analysis, Latorre creates an article that helps define the social discourses within videogames. By using the various elements that videogames create from a ludic point of view, it shows the various representations that videogames can potentially create through the different categories of player/character, game world and game activities. By connecting the principles of this model with the concept of procedurality and procedural rhetoric from Bogost (2010), Latorre shows how a case study of specific videogames can potentially create representations of the material world. By the way the game is creating various traits that look similar to the material world in terms of character, game world and game-activity traits the game can express and persuade the user to think of parallels between the material and virtual world.

It is also important to note the process of Latorre's article. As Šisler (2016) and Bogost mention: videogames are far more than just a ludic design and computational expression.

Latorre introduces the narrative of the player/character, the placement of the player/character in the game world, and what the player/character can do in that world in terms of game activities in Grand Theft Auto IV. By connecting the representations from a narrative's perspective with the ludic design of the game, the case study creates a very thorough research in terms of representations in videogames.

Approaching videogames exclusively from a ludological point of view neglects the amount of representations that can be seen in the process of the videogames' narrative. The same applies when looking at the game purely from a narratological point of view. By not engaging the ludic design of the game, various representations from a ludological approach would be left unveiled. That is why I further in my analysis propose an approach that uses the concept of ludological and narratological perspective. By looking at the ludic design and the narrative of the game with the use of Latorre's model of the "player/character, game world and game activities" and the use of Šisler and Bogost's concepts of procedurality, expression, procedural rhetoric and religion, the immanent religious narrative of *Bloodborne* and *Final Fantasy X* can be analyzed on both a ludological and a narratological level. This allows for a further discussion of how the games do or do not critique religion through their design and means of play.

4 Final Fantasy X

To fully grasp the story of *Final Fantasy X* and how the game creates various forms of expressions through procedural representation, this first section of the chapter will explain the different elements of the narratological structure of the game. I will focus on the game localization; in other words, the different entities that tie together and create the game world and how they tie in the characters' roles when it comes to the narrative. How the game expresses and persuades through procedural representation and procedural rhetoric is linked to how immersive the player interaction is. In other words, how much the player gets to interact and participate in the game's narratological structure is key for the game to express itself and create meaningful representation. Simply put, the unique participatory nature of video games cannot be explained through only through the narratological structure, and has to include the ludological design of the game in order to define exactly how the player interaction is integrated in the game. I will answer how the player/character, game world and game activities contribute to the immanent religious narrative in *FFX*, and conclude with how these elements together express the procedural religion in the game.

4.1   Game world and narrative – Level one

In order to understand the construction of the immanent religious narrative of *Final Fantasy X* is constructed, it is important to explain the different elements creating the game's universe and narrative, and what world the game is set in. I will investigate what creates the game's world, the world's history and the virtual religion.

[Figure 4.1: Sin, the main antagonist, as it appears in Final Fantasy X – A huge leviathan-like creature that returns to Spira every 10th year after its defeat]

The game world of *FFX'* narrative consists of two timelines: The past, which I will refer to as *Zanarkand*, and the present, which I will refer to as *Spira*. *Zanarkand* is an ancient city where the world was run by *machina* (machines) to work for the people. *Spira* is where the game's current events take place. Most of the events and the way *Spira* is structured is a consequence of the past events that took place in *Zanarkand*. In *Spira,* the city of *Zanarkand* and the other machina cities are in ruins. As the player progresses the narrative and explores the world, these ruins; including *Zanarkand* can be seen. This is explained by *Wakka*, one of the protagonists:

> Long time ago, there were a whole lot of cities in Spira. Big cities with machina – machines – to run'em. People played all day and let the machina do the work. […] Sin came, and destroyed the machina cities. And Zanarkand along with 'em. Yeah, that was about a thousand years ago […] (*Wakka Final Fantasy X*: 2002)

Sin is an entity and the catalyst for the game's narrative. *Sin* is shown as a leviathan-like creature, capable of bringing destruction and chaos wherever it goes. *Sin* is the reason why *Spira* is ravaged by terror and despair, as well as the very reason *Zanarkand* and other *machina cities* are in ruins. Sin is a constant entity in the world, that only disappears if defeated.

The time when *Sin* is gone is known as *The Calm*, and spans about ten years. The people of *Spira* are hoping that one day *Sin* will be defeated permanently, and with it their atonement for their past sins. *Sin* was created when there was a war between *Bevelle* and *Zanarkand* during the era of the machina cities, by *Yu Yevon* (see page 50). This is the first incarnation of *Sin*. After that, the daughter of *Yu Yevon: Lady Yunalesca* (see page 50-51) was the first summoner to defeat *Sin* by using the *Final Aeon* and thus began the cycle that the game's narrative revolves around. From this point, *Yevon* was created from the ashes of the war between *Zanarkand* and *Bevelle*. *Sin* has become the embodiment for punishment and human wickedness in Yevon's teachings, serving as a reminder of never to use machina.

Zanarkand is shown as an entirely different world than that of *Spira*. The game does not show much of *Zanarkand* in its prime, but rather as a memory and background story to *Spira*. *Zanarkand* is shown as a futuristic city. The architecture of the cities is technological in comparison to the buildings in *Spira,* which are primitive in their design. *Zanarkand's* buildings are all built by machina and are lit up by electrical lights and pathways above the ground. *Spira* has more primitive structures, such as huts made of straw and wood, often

structured as villages rather than cities. The abandonment of machina is shown with humble and simple structures in *Spira.*

[Figure 4.2: Symbol of *Yevon – Final Fantasy X'* immanent religion]

Religion is constructed in the virtual reality of *Spira*, reflected through various religious ideas and representations influenced by the real world (Šisler 2016: 127). The immanent religious narrative in *FFX* is created through the construction of the religion in the game world. *Spira* is a world controlled by a religious organization known as *Yevon*. *Yevon* is organized as a hierarchy. Their headquarters are located in *Bevelle*, one of the cities in the game world. There are several entities within *Yevon*: They consists of leaders, known as *maesters.*

There are four *maesters* in total, of which one is a *Grand Maester*, each being a representative part of *Yevon's* territory. The priests of *Yevon* are below the *maesters* in the hierarchical structure. The priests tend to be leaders of communities and villages that are under *Yevon's* influence. The *summoners* are close to the priests in terms of the hierarchy. The *summoners* are trained in magic, and are considered protectors of *Yevon*, and are tasked to go through a pilgrimage in hope of defeating *Sin* and bringing *The Calm* – a temporary end to *Sin's* terror. They are accompanied by what is called *guardians*: the bodyguards of the summoner. Lastly, there are the followers of *Yevon*, known as *Yevonites*.

To understand how *FFX* uses procedural rhetoric to express the immanent religious narrative, it is important to map how the game world's religion is constructed. *The teachings of Yevon*

consist of laws, rules and norms that the *Yevonites* follow in order to live an ideal life in *Spira*. *Yevon* teaches that the existence of *Sin* was because of the old *machina cities*. Because of people's lack of work and use of *machina*, the people of Spira was punished, and thus *Sin* originated. As a result, *Yevon* prohibits the use of *machina*.

As the game progresses *Yevon* shows a different nature, where they defy their own teachings. In their capital of *Bevelle*, their soldiers use *machina weapons* and war machines to defend themselves. Later, it is shown that two of the *maesters of Yevon* are *unsent* (see page 46), something that defies their own rituals regarding death. "The enlightened rule by the dead is preferable to the misguided failures of the living" (*Maester Kinoc Final Fantasy X*: 2002) Yevon's hypocrisy becomes one of the main-turning points in the game.

[Figure 4.3: A *Fayth* entrapped as a statue – Their position impersonates the *aeon's* appearance. This is the *fayth of Anima*, representing death and darkness]

Yevon has sacred temples scattered across *Spira*, called *Temples of the Fayth*. Their purpose is for *Yevonites* to come and pray for their families and safety, or to pay respects to previous summoners whose statues are placed in the temple. The temples are decorated with various symbols representing the different villages that have their own *Temple of the Fayth.*

The temple also works as locations for the *summoners* to visit in order to complete their pilgrimage. Each *Temple of the Fayth* has what is called a *fayth*: individuals who sacrificed themselves in order to defeat *Sin*. Each is unique to each temple and incarnate themselves as *aeons*, beings of immense power that assists the *summoners*. "The fayth are people who gave their lives to battle Sin. Yevon took their souls, willingly given from their still-living bodies.

Now they live forever, trapped in statues" (*Lulu Final Fantasy X*, 2002). Inside the temple, there is a chamber known as the *Cloister of Trials*; a trial meant to test the skills of the summoner and his/her guardians. At the end of the *Cloister of Trials*, and the heart of the temple is the *Chamber of the fayth*, where the *fayth statue* is hosted, where the s*ummoner* can pray to receive its power.

By acquiring *aeons*, the *summoners* can become strong enough to perform the *final summoning* and bring forth the *Final Aeon*, created from the bond of the summoner and her/his *guardian.* In their sacrifice, a selected guardian becomes the *Final Aeon*. With its assistance the *summoner* is capable of temporarily defeating *Sin*.

When a character in the game describes *Spira,* they often describe its state with sorrow, death and suffering. "Spira... is a land of suffering and sorrow caught in a spiral of death" (*Seymour Guado Final Fantasy X*, 2002). When people in *Spir*a die, their physical body and personality can potentially linger. They do not disappear immediately, and can be resurrected. However, if they do, they become obsessed with the living, jealous to the point where they want to cause them harm. This is when they become *fiends*, the common reference to enemies of the living. It is worth adding that it does not always happen, as it depends on whether the person was at peace with their death or has a strong purpose they wish to fulfill before they reach the *Farplane* (see below).

In order to prevent the dead from becoming *fiends*, the *summoners* have the ability to perform a ritualistic dance called the *sending*:

> The dead need guidance. Filled with grief over their own death, they refuse to face their fate. They yearn to live on, and resent those still alive. You see, they envy the living. And in time, that envy turns to anger, even hate. Should these souls remain in Spira, they become fiends that prey on the living. Sad, isn't it? The sending takes them to the Farplane, where they may rest in peace (*Lulu Final Fantasy X*: 2002).

When the *sending* is performed, *pyreflie*s can be seen extracted from the physical body. These *pyreflies* looks much like a soul leaving one's body and are linked to the life force in *Spira*. The living can visit the Farplane, a location where *pyreflies* are highly concentrated, and use their memories of their loved ones to get the *pyreflies* to manifest themselves as the person they are thinking of. "People think of their relatives, and the pyreflies react to them. They take on the form of the dead person – an illusion, nothing else" (*Rikku Final Fantasy X*: 2002).

4.2 Game world and narrative – Level two

Looking at how the game world is created through localization, entities and background story they together construct the immanent religious narrative of the game and create representations through procedural rhetoric i.e. how the game represents itself through the player and the means of play. Through the previous thick description of the game world, I can now utilize in slightly more abstract terms how the game world contributes to the immanent religious narrative of *FFX* and list my findings accordingly:

(1) The world of *FFX* is a world connected to both past and present, where the two parts of the timeline are different from each other. In the past, the world was filled with various technological cities which were destroyed and left in ruins by a force of destruction referred to as *Sin*. In the present, the destructive cycle of the world is still present and technology is presumed the reason for it. As a result, the people distance themselves from using any sort of technology. The world in its current state is left with a religion which presents their perception of the world as the truth.

(2) *Sin* is a destructive force which terrorizes the game world. This destructive force is perceived as a cycle that has been going on for a millennium, since the days of the technological cities. It is a constant threat and seen by the game's religion as a symbol of the punishment for humankind's hubris and idleness. It can only be temporarily ceased and will reincarnate after a span of ten years in the game world. (3) The game world is run by a religious organization that preaches and sets the laws that the common citizen can abide in order to live an ideal life in *Sin's* terror. (4) The destructive cycle can only be temporarily put at ease according to the religion by completing the pilgrimage: Through martyrdom and self-sacrifice of certain individuals that practice and prepare their whole life for the journey.

(5) The immanent religion is perceived as hypocritical, ignoring their own prohibitions in terms of their attitude towards death and use of technology. The revelation of the religion's hypocritical attitude becomes a catalyst for the player to oppose the supposed truth by the game's religion. (6) Death has three potential outcomes: After a person's death, they can be *sent* through a ritualistic dance which dissolves their physical body. This is the ideal outcome of a deceased. If they do not become *sent*, they become *unsent*. *Unsent* have the chance to become resentful of the living and their current state, becoming hostile in the aftermath of

their death. The third outcome is becoming an *unsent*, but instead stay grounded and sane, as they either were at peace with their death, or have a strong purpose/mission unfulfilled.

Looking at my findings, we can conclude that the immanent religious narrative of *FFX* is in the construction of the game world and its narratological structure. The game visibly reflects religious ideas through this structure using procedural representations to express these ideas. The game actively convinces and affects the player outside of the virtual world through the elements of the game world, attempting to reveal the hypocrisy behind the tradition and fundamental structure of the game world and its religion.

The game world's ability to immerse the player and create representation is through its way of reflecting religious concepts and ideas from the material world and reconfigure them into the structure of the virtual world. Cultural influences such as "martyrdom", "sacrifice", "pilgrimage", "cycle", "reincarnation", "tradition" and "utopia" are all influences gathered from the outside world's own ideas of spirituality and religion. In other words, the procedural representation created in the game world is influenced by the representations of real rule-based systems (Šisler 2016: 129). In the final goal of *FFX*, the game world wishes for utopia. It is a futuristic fantasy, where the ultimate goal is to break the destructive cycle, break tradition, and find a permanent solution to the game world's current status quo.

4.3   Player/character and narrative – Level one

This section will analyze the main characters in *Final Fantasy X* and how they contribute to the immanent religious narrative. I will cover both playable characters, as well as none-playable characters. What defines a playable character is when the player gets to control the character. A none-playable character (*NPC*) is a character that the player cannot control at all, and only play a part in the narrative through interaction. To define how the protagonists and other characters contribute to the immanent religious narrative, I will explain the characters' traits, roles and personality as they are portrayed within the game.

[Figure 4.4: *Final Fantasy X'* protagonists from left to right: *Auron, Rikku, Wakka, Tidus, Yuna, Kimahri, Lulu*]

Tidus is the main protagonist of the game and also the character the player controls most of the time. He is from the world of *Zanarkand* is depicted as a young and athletic male with blond and spiky hair. *Tidus* comes off as naive, arrogant, immature, but kind hearted. His actions are often emotionally motivated, and he has the tendency to act before he thinks. *Tidus* is teleported from the past to the present during *Sin's* attack on *Zanarkand.* In *Spira* he is an outsider, unaware of *Yevon's* theocratic society, and often breaks norms, taboos and laws because of his ignorance. *Tidus* is also the narrator of the story, and the perspective the player receives when introduced to the game world. During the game's narrative he learns that he himself is an *unsent* who did not survive *Sin's* onslaught. Still he does not become a *fiend* in the game as his purpose and goal becomes clearer as the narrative progresses.

Auron is the first protagonist that *Tidus* encounters, during the destruction of *Zanarkand.* He is *Tidus'* caretaker and mentor and the friend of *Jecht* (see page 50). In his past *Auron* was a warrior monk of *Yevon* and later the *guardian* of *High Summoner Braska* (see page 50). *Auron* is a man of few words, and often cold in his approach when speaking to others. He is portrayed as a wise person with experience, shown through his older appearance and by the way *Tidus* asks him for advice. During *Sin's* destruction of *Zanarkand*, *Auron* is the one who sends *Tidus* to *Spira* by letting them be consumed by *Sin.* He was killed during his first pilgrimage by *Lady Yunalesca* (see page 50-51). In the current events, he wanders *Spira* as an *unsent*. His mind is still clear, as his purpose is to help *Braska's* daughter not commit the same mistakes he did during his pilgrimage.

Jecht is *Tidus'* biological father. *Jecht* disappeared ten years prior to the game's current events, and is the reason why *Auron* is the caretaker of *Tidus*. The reason he disappeared was because he encountered *Sin* and appeared in *Spira*, becoming *High Summoner Braska's guardian. Jecht* comes across as arrogant and tough, yet with good intentions often showing a hard attitude towards his son in hopes of him becoming a better person. In *Spira* no one knows of *Jecht's* fate. As the story progresses, it is revealed that *Jech*t sacrificed himself to become the *Final Aeon* in order to defeat *Sin*. As a result, *Jecht* becomes the cycle's next *Sin* and serves as an antagonist in the game.

High Summoner Braska is the last summoner to defeat *Sin* before the game's current events. He is the father of *Yuna* (see page 51) and the *summoner* who *Auron* and *Jecht* were the *guardians* of. During his pilgrimage, no one had much faith in his success, as he had defied *Yevon's* norms. In the current events everyone praises him, ignoring his past transgressions.

Yu Yevon was the leader of *Zanarkand*. He is the creator of *Sin* and the father of the first *summoner* to defeat *Sin*. *Yu Yevon* plays a role as an antagonist, and is central to the origin of *Spira's* current events. "He is neither good, nor evil. He is awake, yet he dreams" (*Fayth of Bevelle Final Fantasy X*: 2002). During the war between *Zanarkand* and *Bevelle,* thousand years prior to the current events of *Spira*, he created *Sin* in order to fight *Bevelle's machina weapons*. *Sin* became a force of destruction for both allies and enemies alike. *Yu Yevon* accepted his failure and created what is known as *Dream Zanarkand,* an illusion created from the memories of the ones that died during the events of the war. *Yu Yevon's* last act was to give his daughter the means to calm down *Sin* temporarily; creating the cycle that currently terrorizes *Spira*. *Yu Yevon* fell into madness and with one purpose: To continue using the memories of the people of *Zanarkand* to maintain *Dream Zanarkand*. *Sin* became the armor of *Yu Yevon*, so that he could keep *Dream Zanarkand* intact. His appearance is shown as an orb with *Yevon's* emblem on it. His human physical form is never revealed, and the only thing the protagonists see of *Yu Yevon* is a former shadow of himself.

Lady Yunalesca, the daughter of *Yu Yevon*, is the first *summoner* to defeat *Sin* and the one to continue the cycle's tradition. After *Yu Yevon* told *Yunalesca* how to defeat *Sin,* she passed it over to the leaders of *Bevelle* after the *machina war* ended. This became the religion of *Yevon*, where they ironically started worshiping the same person that started the cycle they want to end. *Yunalesca* is ruthless in her wish to uphold the *teachings of Yevon,* and looks upon *Spira's* destiny as doomed without her help. She serves as one of the game's antagonists

believing that there is no other way to defeat *Sin* other than completing the pilgrimage. Her intention is to kill anyone who opposes her and *Yevon's* tradition.

Yuna is the main protagonist alongside *Tidus* and plays a major role in the game's narrative. She is the *summoner* that all the other protagonists become the *guardians* of. She is the daughter of *High Summoner Braska* and as a result carries a huge burden and high expectation from everyone around her. *Yuna* takes after her father in her determination, and dedicates her life to becoming a *summoner* and to defeat *Sin*, showing no fear that this will lead to her own death. She is a newly trained *summoner*, ready to set forth on her pilgrimage. She appears as a selfless and determined individual. She often tends to act without taking her own safety into account.

There are four protagonists which also plays a role in the narrative. However, their roles compared to the other characters mentioned in my analysis do not carry as much impact, and will be shortly described in this paragraph.

Rikku is the third companion and playable character that *Tidus* encounters. *Rikku* saves *Tidus* after he is stranded in one of *Yevon's* temple ruins. She is quite critical of *Yevon's* teachings, and she tries actively to stop summoners from completing their pilgrimage. She later becomes the guardian of *Yuna,* but constantly attempts to convince *Yuna* from sacrificing herself for the *Final Aeon.*

Wakka is the fourth companion of *Tidus* and is the first person *Tidus* encounters on *Besaid Isle*, the place where *Yuna's* pilgrimage starts. *Wakka* is one of the caretakers and guardians of *Yuna.* He is a highly spirited and devoted follower of *Yevon*, often following their teachings vigorously. He has a deep hatred especially for the use of *machina*. His faith in *Yevon* crumbles after seeing their usage of machina and how they oppose their own teachings on several occasions.

Lulu is also the caretaker and guardian of *Yuna*. She is encountered within the game's narrative after *Tidus* trespasses the *Cloister of Trials* on *Besaid Isle.* She shows a stoic, yet gentle personality, and helps *Tidus* in adapting to *Spira*.

Kimahri Ronso is *Yuna's* first and most faithful guardian. *Kimahri* is a *Ronso*, one of the races that inhabits *Spira.* He rarely talks, and only talks to the ones he likes and trusts, showing devotion and loyalty towards *Yuna.*

Seymour Guado is the main antagonist of the game and a *maester of Yevon*. At first, the protagonists show reverence and admiration for him, with the exception of *Tidus* and *Auron*.

He is the son of *Maester Jyscal Guado*. Prior to the events the player partakes in, *Seymour* killed his own father with the intention of inheriting his role as *maester*. *Seymour* asks *Yuna* to become his wife, in hope of developing a relationship strong enough for him to become the *Final Aeon,* and become the next *Sin*. He is shown as a pragmatic person, with evil intentions, showing no remorse for others. He later becomes an unsent, after the party kills him and the servants of *Seymour* denies *Yuna* to perform the *sending.* As an *unsent*, he becomes more obsessive in becoming the next *Sin* and tries several times to kill the party in hope of getting *Yuna* for himself.

Grand Maester Mika is a miscellaneous *NPC*, yet plays an important part in the narrative when it comes to showing *Yevon's* true nature. *Mika* is the leader and the oldest of the *maesters of Yevon*. He is an *unsent* and *Yevon* has actively chosen not to send him after his death. "Grand Maester Mika is a wise leader. Even in his death, he is invaluable to Spira" (*Maester Kelk Ronso Final Fantasy X*: 2002). The state of *Mika* is a defiance of the *Yevon's teachings*. Just like *Seymour, Mika* symbolizes the hypocrisy of *Yevon,* using *machina* to protect *Bevelle* and his and the other *maesters'* attitude towards the *sending* ritual. His acceptance of *Seymour* killing his own father to become a maester further portrays his hypocrisy. Just like *Yunalesca*, he firmly believes that the cycle cannot be broken, and that there truly is no hope for *Spira.*

4.4   Player/character and narrative – Level two

So how do the characters in *Final Fantasy X*, both playable and none-playable, contribute to the immanent religious narrative? We are looking at these characters from a narratological structure, and how they affect the player outside of the virtual reality and how these characters can help persuade or express the player's own subjectivity and opinion; filling the gap between subjectivity and game processes i.e. the *simulation gap* (Bogost 2011: 43)

I will now extract my current findings regarding the characters' contribution to the immanent religious representation of religion in *FFX*: (1) *Tidus* is the outsider and the one who asks questions about the status quo, pestering the game world and its characters with questions such as "why?" or "what if?". The continued rule-breaking behavior strengthens his role as the questioner and opposing force of the status quo we find within *FFX*. (2) The way *Auron* is portrayed in the narrative, serves as the game's reminder of why the religious tradition and

pilgrimage must seize to exist. His wisdom and mentor role helps *Tidus* to ask questions about the status quo, handing both the player and characters information that oppose the idea of *Yevon's* supposed truth, making him the catalyst of doubting the current state of affairs in the game world.

(3) *Jecht* as the current reincarnation of Sin represents two major contributions to the immanent religious narrative: Firstly, he represents how hard it is to break the destructive cycle. Secondly, becoming aware of *Jecht's* fate and exactly how he became Sin creates a necessity to break the cycle and the method used by the game's religion. (4) *Braska,* just like *Auron* and *Jecht*, becomes another reminder of how ineffective the current solution to the cycle is. Their martyrdom and sacrifice, in particular *Jecht* and *Braska* becomes neglected, as they only stopped the cycle temporarily. (5) The characters *Yu Yevon* and *Lady Yunalesca* plays as both the origin of the religion and cycle as well as the maintainers of them. More specifically, *Yu Yevon* becomes the representative to explain the origin of the game's destructive cycle, whereas *Yunalesca* is the keeper and the protector of the cycle. The way *Yunalesca* is represented as an antagonist also affects the player/character into breaking the cycle.

(6) *Yuna*, as the second main protagonist, plays the role of the insider in the game world, in contrast to *Tidus'* outsider role. She becomes the protagonists' and the player's catalyst as to why the destructive cycle of *Spira* has to be broken. (7) *Rikku, Wakka. Lulu* and *Kimahri* plays as representatives of the game world's localization and the status quo of *Yevon*. Specifically, *Rikku* as a non-believer plays a counterpart to *Wakka's* devoted and religious attitude. *Kimahri* and *Lulu* play the more the neutral characters, keeping much of their personal beliefs to themselves, only to give advice and knowledge to *Tidus* and the player "inside" the status quo, unlike *Auron* who brings knowledge "outside" the status quo.

(8) *Seymour* and *Mika* represent the corrupt and hypocritical religion. As both are unsent they oppose the idea of how death should be treated according to the religion's teachings. Their acceptance of how the cycle cannot be broken, and in particular *Mika's* devotion to keep the pilgrimage maintained, strengthens this claim. *Seymour's* twisted ambition and malicious intent on becoming the next Sin further strengthens the game's attempt at persuading the player into believing that the game's current status quo has to be broken.

From a narratological structure, the characters play various roles in persuading the player to question the status quo of the game world. The protagonists play as either catalysts of doubting the status quo, or as explanations of the status quo. The antagonists are the reason to why the status quo of the game world has to be changed and that the current method of the religion's martyrdom, sacrifice and pilgrimage is inefficient and has to be replaced by a more effective solution. From these findings, we can conclude that the characters of *FFX* reflect and reconfigure the immanent religious narrative, but express a desire to reject the religious ideas in the game to change the status quo.

4.5 The ludology of player/character – Level one

[Figure 4.5: *Final Fantasy X'* combat system – Top left shows a description of the available actions. Top right shows each character's turn. Bottom left shows the available commands. Bottom right shows the characters' health-bar (HP), overdrive bar (yellow bar) and magic points (MP)]

The representations created in the game are not just from the narrative, but also from a ludological perspective. Certain actions, events and dialogue are only encountered through player interaction with the character, game world and game activities. Looking at the ludological design will assist in locating the immanent religious representations in *FFX*. The ludic design is the rule-systems implemented in the videogame in order to construct how the player interacts and participate in the game world. "The ability to complete the game (*Final Fantasy X*) requires mastering not only the instrumental controls needed to acquire and perfect gaming skills but also the narrative itself, the cultural knowledge of *Spira* facilitates

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the acquisition of skills and abilities" (Washburn 2009: 152). The *simulation gap* relies in the gap between "rule-based representation and player subjectivity (Bogost 2011: 43), making the necessity to understand both the ludic design of the game, as well as the narratological – as the player subjectivity is affected by both.

The performance rules define how the player's possible actions can affect the course of the game and its fundamentals. The performance rules in *FFX* are shown through either exploring or in combat. When the player controls the character while exploring, the character is able to either run, walk or jump at certain areas. The other method is through combat. The characters are then given the ability to fight and defend themselves, showing the protagonists' unique combat abilities through magic, accuracy, speed, strength, and so on.

The operation rules of FFX functions in two ways and is how player action in the real world affects the actions performed in the virtual world. The interaction with the player and character is represented in two ways; the way a character moves within the game world, and how the character(s) perform in combat. The player is mostly given the control of *Tidus* when exploring, whereas the player is given the choice to control the seven characters when in combat.

State rules are given through the combat of *FFX*. The state rules of a videogame are there to represent the status of the character the player takes control of. There are several bars that represent health, magical power, special attacks and other given stats that represents accuracy, speed, strength, armor, magical defense and physical defense. The state rules given to the player are also an essential part of the simulation gap in *FFX*. What becomes "harder to play" (Bogost 2011: 43) is when the game decides to prevent the player from seeing the enemies' stats, like health, defense etc. This way, the player has to choose how to proceed in combat, as the player has no given information about how strong particular enemies are, making the processes of the rule-systems harder to detect.

The rules for inducing behavior defines how the game sets up its rule-system in order to encourage the player/character into a certain behavior. In order for the game to progress in *FFX*, the player/characters are forced to become traitors as a part of this rule-system. Refusing to do this forces the player to quit progressing the narrative. The game activities persuade the player to defy several aspects of the game world's religion, including trespassing the temple, using machina and killing Yevonites that oppose the player.

The *game mechanics* in *FFX* is tied to both the activities the player performs with the character while exploring, as well as combat. This is how the player's own skills in the real world affects the skills of the character(s) in the virtual world. The player's ability to explore and interact, learning about the world of *Spira* rewards the player. *FFX* does not use the player's mechanical ability in its core mechanics, but rather their knowledge of the game world. The more the player is aware of the abilities and weaknesses of the characters and enemies, the easier the combat becomes, creating unique representations for each character the player controls, as the player can utilize his/her knowledge in the game.

4.6   The ludology of player/character – Level two

Based on the different ludological rules provided by Latorre (2015) I can list my findings as to how the player/character contributes to the immanent religious narrative in *FFX*. The ludological design of the player/character is essential in terms of procedural rhetoric, as the game's ability to give the player control of the character contributes to what becomes by Bogost's definition a "persuasive game" (Bogost 2011: 47) – The ability to affect the player, not just in the virtual world, but also the real world.

Based on what the ludological design of the player/character, we can summarize the current findings as such: (1) The performance rules of *FFX* can potentially provide the representation of various playable characters and their unique abilities and traits – Skills given to each character strengthen their representations. Specifically looking at *Yuna*, who has the ability as a *summoner* to summon *aeons* to replace herself and the party in combat, creates an audiovisual image of how *summoners'* powers make them unique in their quest.

(2) As the player lacks much freedom in terms of the rule-parameters, the player/character's own actions affect the game world on a basic level, where the operation rules are mostly designed through pressing buttons for the player in order to the character to take action or proceed in the narrative. (3) The state rules are linked to the performance rules, and help represent each character's unique abilities – what their strengths and weaknesses are against the enemies the player encounters.

(4) As the player is limited to only a few actions or alternatives, the ludic design of the player/character forces the player into conducting actions that induce the player's behavior to oppose the game world's status quo and religion. The rules for inducing player behavior forces the player to not reject the actions, as not performing them halts the progress of the narrative. (5) The game mechanics of the game does not force, but encourages the player to take an interest in the game world. By immersing themselves the player is provided with information regarding the religion, culture and structure of the game world. Becoming aware of the game world makes understanding its enemies and landscape easier, thus making the combat easier.

The ludic design of the player/character contributes to the immanent religious narrative in *FFX* by both encouraging the player through the game mechanics to learn and immerse in the game world. It also can force the player through the ludological design of the narrative to oppose *Yevon* as a religious organization. Through forcing the player to oppose the virtual religion, it rejects the ideas of religion in its immanent religious narrative.

4.7   The ludology of the game world – Level one

The *spatiotemporal design* is how player interaction affects the game world. *FFX* is often constructed in a reactive environment, where the environment is less dependent on player interaction. Occasionally however, the reactive environment turns into an active environment, especially with the mechanics regarding the *Cloister of Trials*. The *Cloister of Trials* forces the player to partake in the ritual of the summoner's pilgrimage in order to receive an aeon and to progress in the narrative. Some of these are optional, but certain areas are forced by the game-rules to progress. The *Cloister of Trials* is designed as a puzzle for the player. Finding the rules and the processes of this puzzle is the challenge, and by engaging in this puzzle, the player can unlock new items as well as new powers to use in combat.

Rules of blocking/unblocking areas and states in the game world is how the game decides what paths the player is allowed to access or not in order to organize the game's narratological structure and ludological structure. These rules in *FFX* have a linear design, and the rules function for the player to not gain access to later areas in the game. When the player is being forced to become traitors of *Yevon*, the game turns unlocked areas to be locked and inaccessible, as they represent parts of *Yevon* that considers the characters traitors. This works

vice versa, as areas are unlocked as the game's narrative progresses, giving new areas for the player to explore and new enemies to fight.

The patterns of behavior of none-playable characters is connected once again to the narrative and the various events that occur through player interaction with the game world. These rules are based on how *NPCs'* behavior is regulated through player interaction or actions. For instance, the murdering of *Seymour* and being announced as blasphemers and traitors, various *NPCs* change their behavior according to the events that take place. *Yevonites* change their patterns from being friendly to becoming hostile. The game creates the representation of which *NPCs* are devoted *followers of Yevon*. By changing the rule-system of these *NPCs*, the player might experience that certain areas harder to access for the player, as these *NPCs* may turn hostile and initiate combat against the player.

The rules that are based on the objects in the game world are more basic than that of *NPCs* even though they abide by the same principles. It is how objects in the game world is affected through player interaction. The objects in *FFX* are connected to the player's own interaction with puzzles and exploration. Objects, such as doors, treasure chests and secret rooms are only accessed if the player engages and interacts with the game world.

The rules that induce behavior function as a catalyst for the player/character to engage in certain behaviors and representations in the game world. In *FFX* it functions as a way for the player/character to change their view and representation of the game world. As the game progresses the player learns that several rules and laws that *Yevon* has, are defied by the priests and *maesters*. The game world and the characters' representation is changed through the turning point of the game's narrative by inducing the player to behave as traitors towards *Yevon*.

4.8   The ludology of the game world – Level two

The contribution to the immanent religious narrative in *FFX* through the game world is crucial, as these are the rules designed for how the player interacts with the game world, and how their actions affect the game world. This is critical when looking at the narrative, as the actions conducted by the player affect the narrative just as much as the game world.

My findings on the ludic design of the game world are as follows: (1) The spatiotemporal design of FFX creates the procedurality between the player and the game world, and their relationship. As the narrative progresses, the player's role in the game world changes. The player goes from not being a part of the culture, into performing tasks and rituals in order for the game world to "change", by for instance partaking in the pilgrimage and visit the temples located in the game world.

(2) The rules of blocking/unblocking areas are based on what they represent. They are either accessible or not depending on the player's current relationship with the game world. By killing one of the heads of the game world's religion, new areas are accessed, whereas old places, who is represented as parts of the world's religion are blocked for the player to access. (3) The patterns of none-playable characters' behavior are linked to the game rules that force the player into opposing the game world's status quo. By performing actions that challenge the status quo, *NPCs* either support or turn hostile towards the player, depending on how they are represented in the narrative of the game. (4) The rules based on objects in the game world go back to the spatiotemporal design of the game, where areas and objects in the game world are affected mostly through performing actions that progress the pilgrimage, or when opposing the status quo, rewarding the player with objects that would otherwise not be accessible.

(5) The rules that induce behavior contribute to the immanent religious narrative rewarding the player by conducting certain actions that will oppose the status quo and the religion in the game world. The player is rewarded with new items, powers and new areas to explore. If the player chooses not to perform these certain actions the player is punished by halting the progress of the narrative.

The ludological rules that create the game world has an essential role in contributing to the immanent religious narrative. The rules stated here enforce player action that affects the game world's status quo, by rewarding the player with items, new areas, experience and stronger characters. There is a clear distinction in the game rules of what is "acceptable" behavior versus "non-acceptable" behavior, as the game linear narrative cannot progress whenever "non-acceptable" behavior is performed. Whereas the narrative and game world reflects religious ideas, the ludic design rejects them by endorsing the player's action in opposing the virtual religion.

4.9   The ludology of game activities – Level one

[Figure 4.6: The Temple of Djose – Cloister of Trials – Each temple the player visits are unique in its puzzle. Here we see Tidus holding a sphere standing in front of a pedestal with a sphere inserted in it. The spheres contain powers, that can be seen through the current where the sphere is inserted. The goal in each temple is to reach the Chamber of the Fayth]

Patterns of actions are connected again to the exploration provided by the game, as well as the combat. It is the behavior of the player and how the game teaches the player what actions are appropriate in order to complete the final objective and what actions that are not. In *FFX* there are several patterns of action relied on exploration and combat. There are puzzles called the *Cloister of Trials* which are a crucial part of the narrative as well as the patterns of action. These puzzles are designed for the player in order to create a challenge, making the game "harder to play" (Bogost 2010: 43). By completing these, the player gains access to new aeons and new powers for *Yuna*. This is also tied to the combat part of the game, as these aeons can be used in combat. The combat system has a different pattern of action, where other rules are given in order to progress. The activity is a turn-based combat system used to give the player strategical choices, deciding which character is more efficient against certain enemies. Through the patterns of action, the game rewards the player for following the rule-system.

The winning and losing conditions are connected to the combat in *FFX*. Winning and losing conditions are defined as the way the game is constructed to reward or punish the player through certain actions or lack of action. There are no chance to "lose" in *FFX* while exploring, as the game does not provide state rules as they do in combat. The losing condition

happens when the characters' health reaches zero while in combat. The player is then met with a "Game Over" screen and restarts back to the last saved game file. The winning condition of *FFX* is defeating *Yu Yevon* and destroying *Sin*. The player's chance to "win" becomes harder as the enemies become tougher. This is obvious when encountering "bosses". Bosses are enemies with more strengths than weaknesses, and require the player to have gained enough experience with the characters in order to defeat them.

Degree of redundancy versus variability of the game play is how a videogame's final objective is reached through either a singular way or several ways. The narrative of *FFX* is linear, and provides only a single way of completing goal of the game. What creates variability in *FFX* are the subplots which are not directly related to the final goal of the game, but can still add to game world and narrative.

The *game mechanics* in *FFX* are essential in terms of providing the sense of meaning behind actions performed by the player correlated to the game world. Game mechanics works as a way for videogames to create representations through game activities. The puzzles of the *Cloister of Trials* for instance are representations that create meaning for the player by interaction. Through these interactions with the game world and player, immersion is created, creating a connection between ludic and narratological design.

The chains of actions are linear in the narrative. Chains of actions are how a number of consecutive actions lead to a specific outcome. As a player it is impossible to progress in the story without performing certain tasks, such as the *Cloister of Trials*, or defeating bosses. It is directly tied to the game world and the rules concerning blocking/unblocking areas and states within the game. The player will not be able to gain access to areas, temples, aeons and so on if he/she does not defeat a boss and complete the puzzles.

Strategic/tactical dilemmas in *FFX* are mainly tied to the turn-based combat that the player has to perform in order to progress in the game. The strategic/tactical dilemma in videogames often functions often as the core of videogames in terms of defining a game either as "easy to play" or "hard to play", providing the player with situations that require the player to decide on actions that either create advantages or disadvantages. When it comes to the exploration and progressing outside of the combat system, the player is not met with many tactical and ethical dilemmas, as the game forces the player to do certain game activities in order to progress the narrative. However, when it comes to combat, strategical dilemmas are a crucial

aspect of how the game creates a challenge and progress for the player. This is provided by the state rules regarding the character and enemies. The simulation gap, where the game creates a rule-system that makes it harder to play, and rewards the player through gaining experience and defeating enemies in order to become stronger and more proficient in combat.

4.10   The ludology of game-activities – Level two

As with the ludological design of the player/character and game world, the design of game activities is also a contributor the immanent religious narrative. These activities are what ties the player/character to the game world, and through these game activities can representations and expressions be created through the procedural rhetoric of *FFX.*

Looking at the game activities and their ludological design, I have made the following discoveries: (1) Patterns of action is what differentiates actions that are seen as progressive or non-progressive. In its contribution to the immanent religious narrative, the actions that are taught as acceptable actions are the ones that oppose the status quo of the game world, and oppose the supposed truth of the game world's religion. (2) The winning and losing conditions of *FFX* tie to the patterns of action, and strengthen the encouragement to oppose the game world's current state. (3) The way the player reaches the final goal is through a linear narrative. Through its design, and the lack of variability in the gameplay, the game forces the player to perform certain actions, as alternative options are limited or not present.

(4) Game mechanics contribute to player action carrying meaning. Performing the puzzles, provided in the temples in the game world, creates meaning behind the pilgrimage – giving the player a necessity to complete these tasks in order to progress. It creates a different contribution to the immanent religious narrative, as this is one of the few game mechanics that strengthens the game world's status quo, in order to continue the narrative. (5) Chains of actions, just like patterns of action, are there to enforce the idea of certain actions being acceptable within the game rules and, in terms of *FFX,* these actions are there to oppose the status quo. (6) Strategic/tactical dilemmas are the core aspect of *FFX'* combat system and what fills the gap between player subjectivity and game rules, i.e. the simulation gap. Creating tactical dilemmas through the combat system, the game rules provides representations of certain enemies and their relationship with the player/character. Fighting enemies that represent the status quo by making them hard to defeat might symbolize how integrated the

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current status quo is to the game world, and how hard it is for the player to oppose and challenge this status quo when progressing the narrative.

4.11   Major findings from *Final Fantasy X*

The analysis of both the narratological and ludological design of *Final Fantasy X* has shown that the game has a fundamentally critical attitude towards the immanent religion of the game and the status quo of the game world. The game is clear in its procedural religion that religious ideas such as sacrifice, martyrdom and tradition are not the correct way to solve the deeper issues that exists in the game's reality. Through the game activities provided through the game world and player interaction, it is evident that the solution given to solve the issues in the game world is from distancing the game world from its superstitious beliefs in sin, punishment and religious law. The rhetoric in the game essentially suggests to the player that a world free of religion is the ultimate goal, and will eventually save the world.

4.12   Religious critique in the ludological and narratological structure – Level three

I have now explicitly gone through what creates the overall structure of *Final Fantasy X'* ludological and narratological design and answered how the various aspects contribute to the immanent religious representation in the game. My findings conclude that the procedural religion in the game does not want the immanent religion to exist. Although the virtual religion reflects religious ideas and notions, it ultimately rejects them through the game's rule-parameters and narrative. In that regard, I have come to the conclusion that the game carries elements of both Nietzschean and Marxian theories regarding religious critique.

When we take a glance at *FFX'* status quo, it carries similarities regarding Marx' critique of religion and how exactly religion functions, as put by McLellan:

> The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and selfawareness of man who either has not yet attained to himself or has already lost himself again. (McLellan 2000: 71).

When we compare this statement to the origin of *FFX'* immanent religion, they carry distinct similarities. The origin of *Yevon* is created through humans a thousand years prior to the current events of *FFX*. In the current events of the game, religion functions as beacon of hope

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for the people of the game world, hoping that by following the methods of Yevon, the suffering and pain will have an end, similar to Marx' statement of religion:

> Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people. (McLellan 2000: 72).

Yevon becomes the game world's "opium", a paradoxical function, as it follows a Marxian pattern, where it expresses real suffering, living in constant fear, but yet protests against the real suffering by not opposing the status quo.

By looking at Nietzsche's religious critique, he announces that "God is dead" (Nietzsche 2010: 12) and that he (Zarathustra) will "teach you the overman" (Nietzsche 2010: 13). Shortly summarized, Nietzsche states the death of God and a wish for humankind to become "overman" or "übermensch" as a metaphor for his philosophy that humankind should distance itself from religion, and become something superior to humankind:

> I teach you the overman. Man is something to be surpassed. What have you done to surpass him? […] The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The overman shall be the meaning of the earth! (Nietzsche 2010: 13).

If we look at the procedural religion of *FFX* and its rhetoric in comparison to Nietzsche's critique of religion, they also carry similarities. The game wishes through ludic and narratological design to persuade the player/character into distancing themselves from the current status quo, as the game expresses that a new status quo, where religion is absent, is the best outcome. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2010) can be compared to the game's rejection of the immanent religion and its state in the game world's status quo, as both express a desire for humankind to surpass themselves. Where Nietzsche states that "God is dead" as key to surpass the status quo of the real world, *FFX*' procedural religion expresses that the player/character should surpass the status quo of the virtual world, and end the cycle in the game world.

For Nietzsche, the cycle is what represents what is wrong with the world (Williams 2002: 194-195). The task of the "übermensch" is to break the cycle. Similar to that of Nietzsche, the narratology and ludology of *FFX* expresses a desire to break the status quo's cycle, by creating a permanent solution to the issues in the game world, rather than the old, traditional one.

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After looking at a comparative view of *FFX* to Nietzschean and Marxian religious critique, I can list my final findings of *FFX'* procedural religion:

(1) The status quo, and the immanent religion is created through humankind, much like how Marx states that religion is made through mankind. (2) The status quo expresses suffering by embracing the immanent religion's way of life, and oppose the origin of the suffering by maintaining the current status quo through the traditional methods. It becomes the "opium of the people". (3) *Yevon* as the immanent religion becomes the game's ultimate goal to defy, thus carrying similarities to Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead" (Nietzsche 2010: 12), a wish for humankind to distance itself from religion. (4) By defying the game world's status quo, the ability for humankind to surpass itself becomes possible, having similarities of Nietzschean philosophy about the "übermensch". (Nietzsche 2010: 13).

In conclusion, although the game does not explicitly state theories of either Marx or Nietzsche, I have shown how the procedural rhetoric of *FFX* share elements commonly known from their philosophies. *Final Fantasy X* expresses a rejection of its immanent religious narrative, similar Marx' and Nietzsche's philosophies. The status quo of the game world represents the reflection of religious ideas and notions, whereas the actions performed reject the entirety of them, similar to Marx and Nietzsche's desire for the oppressed to break the religion's shackles. The procedural religion in *FFX* can be concluded to a rhetoric of "no religion". A paradoxical conclusion, as the game's procedural religion wants to persuade its interpreter that there should be no religion.

5 *Bloodborne*

In this chapter, I will do an in-depth analysis of *Bloodborne's* narratological and ludological design. It is important to note that for this analysis, I will go deeper into the lore and game world to investigate the immanent religious narrative, in comparison to *FFX*. What makes *Bloodborne* unique in its design is the freedom the game gives the player, on both a ludological and narratological level. In other words, players who are only interested in the game for its ludological design, do not require to know much about the game's narrative. Through this analysis I will follow the structure as I did in the previous chapter. I will apply a thick description of the game world and its narrative, followed up by a critical interpretation. The same will be done regarding player/characters and narrative, as well as with the ludological design of the game. Lastly, I will investigate if the game carries elements that resembles religious critique from a philosophical perspective.

5.1   Game world and narrative – Level one

The game world of *Bloodborne* is constructed, and requires the player to investigate both obligatory and optional elements of the game to understand and interpret it. The game's narratological structure is designed through the interpreter (Bogost 2011: 5), making it a unique and challenging analysis, as it is not always the characters that explain the game world and its status quo, but the items, weapons and artifacts that requires player interaction.

I will now look at the geographical placement of *Bloodborne* and how its game world is layered. The game takes place in a city called *Yharnam*, a Gothic city, highly influenced by Victorian architecture and culture in its design. Its current state shows several areas of the game world ravaged by the scourge of beasts; a plague that currently terrorizes the *Yharnamites* and turn them into man-hunting beasts. In the outskirts of *Yharnam* lies the *Byrgenwerth College*. *Yharnam* is built on top of an ancient city called *Pthumeru*, also known as the *Chalice Dungeons*, which is the home of an ancient race of superhumans called *Pthumerians*. Through the *Hunter's Dream* (**see page xx)** the *Hunter's Nightmare* can be accessed. *The Hunter's Nightmare* is a twisted alternative reality of events that took place long before the current events of *Bloodborn*e.

[Figure 5.1: Blood-starved Beast: One of Bloodborne's bosses. Beasts takes the form of a humanoid wolf and feed on the old-blood. Beasts comes in many sizes, and the Blood-starved Beast is one of the bigger the player encounters]

Bloodborne's status quo is currently in a disaster, where *Yharnam* and its citizens are terrorized by beasts. These beasts are a result of the so-called *blood transfusion*:

> Oh yes... Paleblood. Well, you've come to right place. Yharnam is the home of blood ministration. You need only unravel its mystery. But, where's an outsider like yourself to begin? Easy, with a bit of Yharnam blood of your own... But first, you'll need a contract... [...] Good all signed and sealed. Now, let's begin the transfusion. Oh, don't you worry. Whatever happens... You may think it all a mere bad dream. (Unknown Healing Church member Bloodborne: 2015)

Blood transfusion is the catalyst for the status quo of in the game world. *Blood transfusion* means giving the citizens and travelers who visit *Yharnam* the *blood of the Great Ones* (**see page xx**), which carries miraculous healing capabilities. During the current events, the blood ministration is only allowed if the sick sign a contract to become hunters, to help out with the plague. The blood is transfused into the patient, which heals the individual of any ailment. However, some of the blood is infected with what is called *ashen blood*, which turns users into beasts. The more blood transfused, the more powerful the beast becomes. This is the source for *the scourge of beasts* which currently takes place in the city of *Yharnam.*

In this section, I will cover what the *Great Ones* are and what their role in the status quo is. Everything in *Bloodborne* is linked to the *Great Ones*, either directly or indirectly. They are the equivalent of gods. *The Great Ones* are beings on a higher plane with inhuman powers and capabilities, able to create alternative realities, where the lines between dreams, nightmares and reality are blurred. The game never truly explains what a *Great One* truly is, other than that they are a unique, inhuman race that influence the game world. Either directly, or indirectly, the *Yharnamites* worship these beings.

The appearance and agenda varies from each *Great One*, as they take on different roles in the game world. There are several of them, each unique to one another. While some carry a kind nature, others carry a malicious and evil intention. "The Great Ones that inhabit the nightmare are sympathetic in spirit, and often answer when called upon" (*Moon Rune item Bloodborne*: 2015). There are seven "true" *Great Ones* that are mentioned in the game, and another three *"kin" Great Ones*. *Kin* are not true Great Ones, but rather beings that have acquired similarities to the immense and awesome powers of "true" *Great Ones*. The seven "true" *Great Ones* are *Amygdala, Brain of Mensis, Kos, Mergo's Wet Nurse, Moon Presence* and *Oedon*. The *kin Great Ones* are *Rom, the Vacuous Spider, Celestial Emissary* and *Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos.* All of them play a role regarding the status quo, and I will further explain them in the character section of the analysis.

[Figure 5.2: The Hunter's Dream – The game's main hub and where the First Hunter Gehrman, the host of the dream, is currently present.

As mentioned, one of the *Great Ones'* abilities are to create nightmares; a world that blurs the lines between dreams and reality. *The Hunter's Dream* is a dream created by the *Great One; The Moon Presence* through the perception of the human Gehrman, *the First Hunter*. It is the game world's "main hub", where the *hunters* can rest, and travel to various places of *Yharnam*. In the *Hunter's Dream*, there are two that inhabit it: *Gehrman* and *the Plain Doll*. Both serve the *hunter*, allowing the *hunter* to use the workshop to enhance their physical prowess and weapons. Although never directly pointed out, the *Hunter's Dream* is speculated to be designed for hunters to kill other *Great Ones*. Once a *Great One* is slain, the *hunter's* own perception of the *Hunter's Dream* dissolves.

The *blood of the Great Ones* lies in possession of the *Healing Church*; an organization which builds their faith and beliefs in acquiring knowledge about the *Great Ones*. *The Healing Church* has sealed itself off from *Yharnam*, in hope of protecting themselves from *the scourge of beasts*. They are also one of the main factions of *Bloodborn*e, and are responsible for most of the current events in the game. *The Healing Church* is divided into several sections, mainly three branches: *The Hunters, The Choir and The School of Mensis*.
The Hunters are mostly common members of the church, trained in the arts of combat to kill and hunt beasts. When the *scourge of beasts* came, *Laurence, the First Vicar*, and the leader of the *Healing Church*, allowed *Yharnamites* to join the hunt, to not receive the blame for the *scourge* themselves.
The Choir is the highest-ranking members of the *Healing Church* and a secret group. Their intention is to experiment on *Great Ones* to evolve humanity into a higher plane of existence.
The School of Mensis is a sub-group of the *Choir* and controls *Yahar'gul, the Unseen Village* – A village only accessed by the ones who possess the *Great Ones' insight*. They search for the secrets of the *Great Ones* to use them to gain advantage for humanity. *The Healing Church* is known everywhere in the world of *Bloodborne*, attracting travelers and outsiders alike, for the miraculous healing possessions of the *Old Blood* they have acquired through years of research and exploration in the ancient ruins of *Pthumeru*.

Byrgenwerth College is where the studies of the *Great Ones* and human transcendence began. *The Healing Church* stems from *Byrgenwerth* and carries similar interests in the *Great Ones*, but acquires knowledge of them differently. *The Byrgenwerth Scholars* and their institution was founded by *Provost Willem*. *Byrgenwerth* however resented the usage of the *Old Blood,* fearing its unknown power and influence over humankind. *The Healing Church* was founded

on this principle, disagreeing with *Byrgenwerth*, and started experimenting and utilizing the *Old Blood's* power. *Byrgenwerth* wanted to require insight, a literal term, wanting "eyes on the inside" instead of using the *Old Blood*. "At Byrgenwerth Master Willem had an epiphany: "We are thinking on the basest of planes. What we need, are more eyes" (*Great One's Wisdom item Bloodborne*: 2015). Gaining "more eyes on the inside" grants humans the insight of a *Great One,* even at the cost of one's sanity.

[Figure 5.3: *Queen Yharnam* as she appears in the *Nightmare of Mensis*. *A Pthumerian* and mother of the *infant Great One Merg*o. *Pthumerians* are generally depicted as bigger and taller than a human]

Pthumeru is the ancient lands and the ruins that lie beneath *Yharnam*. Long before the current events of the game, *Pthumeru* and its inhabitants lived in the underground of *Yharnam*. *The Pthumerians* are referred to as superhumans, shown as bigger, stronger and faster than the average human. While *Pthumeru* was still a civilization, they found traces the *Great Ones* and their blood and started experimenting on it, using its healing capabilities to heal any sort of ailment, much like what the *Healing Church* is currently doing.

It is never directly mentioned how, but during their experimentation, they accidentally came across the infected *ashen blood.* This blood, most likely is the catalyst for *Pthumeru's* downfall, corrupted the *Pthumerian*s, creating *a scourge of beasts.* The ruins of *Pthumeru* are now the source and the reason the *Healing Church* carries power in *Yharnam*. While their healers and other members of the *Church* heal and treat the sick, other selected members explore the ruins of *Pthumeru*, trying to discover the secrets kept about the *Great Ones*.

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5.2   Game world and narrative – Level two

The way the game world of *Bloodborne* is structured sets up for a narrative where the immanent religious narrative is located not only through progression of the narrative, but through the sub-plots and the locations that are not necessarily obligatory for the main narrative. Looking at not only the main narrative, but also at the sub-plots contributes to the immanent religious narrative and the procedural rhetoric in *Bloodborne*. From the narratological structure of the game world, I can list these findings:

(1) The game is an occult world where the immanent religion in the game world relies on the miraculous healing powers of the blood of an ancient, superior species. Through these resources the religion has gained tremendous power and influence, having both locals and foreigners come to them to be cured. The church's hubris and overuse of the blood they possess, ends with being their downfall, as some of the blood is also contaminated, which ends with a plague being spread throughout the game world. As a result, *Bloodborne's* locations are ravaged by the plague, and the narrative sets up for a world where the lines between reality and dreams are blurry. In comparison to *Final Fantasy X*, the game carries similarities when it comes to the critique of religious organizations, where the organization preys on the weak. (2) The *blood transfusion* and *blood ministration* becomes the religion's way of recruiting members. Their monopoly of the miraculous healing powers becomes the catalyst for the status quo, as characters are forced to become members to be healed through the *blood transfusion*. The game world of *Bloodborne*, just like with *FFX'* constructs a religion which is corrupt by the powers they have gained. However, while *Bloodborne* emphasizes the immanent religion's wish for humanity to transcend into divinity, *FFX* emphasizes the religion's hypocrisy.

(3) *The Great Ones* are the gods of the game world, and their presence is depicted as a mysterious force and power beyond human comprehension, as the game world does not provide much information about them. They are worshiped and the game world expresses a wish to know more about them, and to even become like them. Religion in the game world of *Bloodborne* is, unlike *FFX*, not set to one "truth", as there are various ways of worshipping the religion. *FFX* carries rhetorics that want religion to not exist, while *Bloodborne* does not express this notion. (4) *The Hunter's Dream* is the game world's connection to the *Great Ones* and humans, as the dream is a created from a *Great One's* powers and through the memories

of a human. The dream works as the status quo and its cycle, as it appears to have been there even before the current events.

(5) *The Healing Church* is the game's immanent religion and in the center of the game world's status quo. The immanent religion is divided into three sections which rely on researching the game's cosmic entities. It was split with *Byrgenwerth College*, which found the *Healing Church* to be careless in their approach to gather knowledge. The immanent religion in Bloodborne is constructed through a will to gain power, and the goal of that is for humanity to transcend. *FFX* constructs its immanent religion and status quo through the laws and regulations that the immanent religion has created in the game world.

(6) *Pthumeru* works as the game world's primeval history and the foundation of the knowledge that the immanent religion has gained in *Bloodborne*. Similar to how *Zanarkand* works as *FFX'* primeval history and beginning of the cycle, *Pthumeru* for *Bloodborne* symbolizes the beginning of the game's cycle and status quo. (7) *The ashen blood* and the *scourge* is what haunted both *Pthumeru* and is in the game's current status quo. They represent the cycle and humanity's hubris, as the game world is currently terrorized by their indiscretion. Although depicted differently in *Bloodborne*, these elements symbolize punishment, similarly to how the immanent religion in *FFX* depicts *Sin* as the incarnation of humanity's sins.

The immanent religious narrative of *Bloodborne* is constructed in its primeval history as well as its current status quo. It is apparent that the game wishes to express the corruption of the game's religion through revealing the actions and consequences that the game world and the religion has received in its status quo. Much like *FFX* the status quo is there to critique the actions of the immanent religion in the game worlds, but from a different perspective. *FFX* critiques religious organizations through their corruption and hypocrisy, notably through technology. In *Bloodborne* the church is split in its attempt to acquire more knowledge of the *Great Ones*, the game world's divinity. The one part wanted to gain knowledge equal to a *Great One* through gaining insight, while the other wanted the powers of the *Great Ones* by using their blood. Both methods are disregarded, as the status quo shows that these methods continues the current cycle.

The game creates immersion for the player through the cultural influences it has from the material world. Religious ideas such as "cycle" and "mysticism" becomes prominent, as the

game world's immanent religious narrative expresses that several entities in the game world want to acquire knowledge of the unknown, which is unobtainable through average human intellect. The final goal emphasizes this, as the three endings of the game build on how much knowledge the protagonist has acquired of the divine. The game world reconfigures religious ideas and notions through the various ways to acquire knowledge about the immanent religion, unlike *FFX* which rejects the idea of religion and religious notions altogether through its procedural rhetoric.

5.3   Characters and narrative – Level one

This section will cover characters that contributes to the immanent religious narrative of the game. When I speak of characters in *Bloodborne,* I will not only cover characters that the player encounters, but also characters and beings that are mentioned or spoken of through items and/or dialogue. This includes the various *Great Ones* that I previously mentioned in the game world section, as well as some of the *Pthumerians* and beasts that play a role in the narratological structure of *Bloodborne*. When I describe these characters, I will mention the various characters as they seem relevant to each other, to avoid any confusion in the narrative. It is important to mention that not all of these characters are encountered by the player. Some of them are only mentioned as parts of the narratological structure of the game, while the player can miss out on others, if they do not do a thorough search of the game world.

The protagonist of the game (referred to as *the Hunter*) is an unknown outsider, who becomes a hunter after conducting the *blood transfusion*. Not much is known about *the Hunter,* other than that he/she is inflicted with an unknown disease and travels to *Yharnam* being aware that the *Healing Church* provides the *Yharnamites* and outsiders alike with the healing power of the *Old Blood*. When the outsider has become a hunter, he/she changes the course of the status quo. The task for *the Hunter* is vague, where he/she discovers a note that states "Seek Paleblood to transcend the hunt" (*Note in Iosefka's clinic, Bloodborne*: 2015). It becomes one of the tasks of *the Hunter* to find out what *Paleblood* is. Although the Hunter consumes blood vials, blood that is stored in vials of the *Great Ones*, he/she never becomes a beast. This might be from a ludological standpoint, as it would be impractical for the game, but could also be symbolic, as the *Hunter* grows stronger and more efficient in her/his hunt.

Gehrman, the First Hunter, is the keeper of the *Hunter's Dream* and first character that the player is introduced to. As his name implies, he was the first hunter, and due to his old age, plays his role as an adviser to all the hunters who visit the *Hunter's Dream*. He is the founder of the *Healing Church Workshop*, the place which the *Hunter's Dream* is based on, and has deep connections to *Provost Willem* (see page 75) and *Master Laurence* (see page 76)). He is also a servant of the *Great One the Moon Presence*, the creator of the *Hunter's Dream*. He is one of the most skilled hunters, showing incredible force and velocity with his weapon, should *the Hunter* decide to fight him. *Gehrman* plays a significant role in the game's three available endings. He gives the player two options: (1) Wake up from the *Hunter's Dream* as *the Hunter* has accomplished the purpose of the dream; to slay a *Great One*, or (2) to deny *Gehrman's* offer and fight him. Killing him results in two outcomes, depending on what the player did prior to the dialogue with *Gehrman*. I will cover these two options in the next paragraph.


[Figure 5.4: *The Moon Presence, a Great One*, as it appears after descending from the *Paleblood* moon, its home].

The Moon Presence is perhaps the most important *Great One* in terms of the status quo. *The Moon Presence*, also known as *Paleblood*, is *a Great One* who resides on the moon. It is the manufacturer of the *Hunter's Dream* and one of the *Great Ones* speculated to have an intent to eradicate other fellow *Great Ones*, as the *Hunter's Dream* is likely created only for the purpose of seeking hunters capable of killing other *Great Ones*. If the player should decide to oppose *Gehrman's* offer and succeed, *the Moon Presence* will descend from the moon,

embracing *the Hunter.* If the player has not consumed three *umbilical cords* from a *Great One*, the player is embraced and becomes the new keeper of the *Hunter's Dream*, replacing *Gehrman*. If the player has consumed the *umbilical cords*, the *Moon Presence's* embrace will be denied, and the *Hunter* will be forced to fight the *Moon Presence.* Successfully slaying *Paleblood* results in *the Hunter* becoming an *infant Great One*, and the owner of the *Hunter's* Dream and the new cycle – perhaps ending the never-ending nightmare that *Yharnam* is consumed by.

Provost Willem is the head of *Byrgenwerth College,* and the catalyst of the knowledge of the *Great Ones*. He plays an essential role in the narrative, as he is the scholar who fanatically sent expeditions to the ruins of *Pthumeru* where they found the knowledge of the *Great Ones* and the *Old Blood*, which would be the fundamental pillar that the *Healing Church* would base its ministry on. However, *Willem* found the lack of knowledge of the *Old Blood* disturbing, seeing the signs of what happened in the ruins. He then decided to study the *Great Ones* not through their blood, but through gaining *insight*. The wish not to use the *Old Blood*, caused a split between the *Byrgenwerth Scholars. Willem* continued his studies, eventually coming in contact with a *Great One*. This lead to the ruin of the college. In the current timeline of *Bloodborne*, *Willem* is trapped in *Byrgenwerth College* by *the Kin Great One*, *Rom, the Vacuous Spider*, who resides in the lake next to the college.
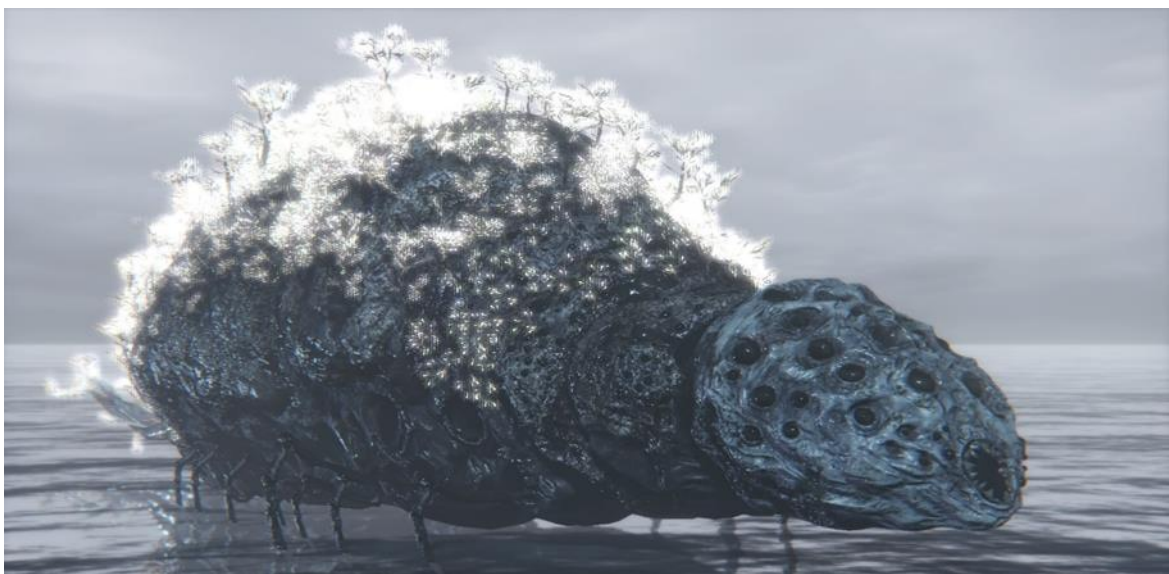
[Figure 5.5: *Rom the Vacuous Spider*, as it appears at *Moonside Lake* near *Byrgenwerth College*. *A kin Great One*; it is depicted with eyes all across its body. Once slain the moon changes its color from white to red, symbolizing that the barrier between the *Great Ones* and humans are no longer maintained]

Rom, the Vacuous Spider is as mentioned, *a kin Great One*. A former *Byrgenwerth Scholar* who through the *Great One Kos* (see page 78) went through a metamorphosis from human to kin, granting the previous scholar insight to the *Great Ones'* knowledge. "Ahh, Kos, or some say Kosm... Do you hear our prayers? As you once did for the vacuous Rom, grant us eyes, grant us eyes." (*Micolash, Host of the Nightmare, Bloodborne:* 2015). *Rom* is the being that holds *Yharnam's* horrors hidden from the *Yharnamites*. Once *the Hunter* slays *Rom*, the true horrors that inhabit *Yharnam* can be seen, as the barrier between dream and reality is no longer being maintained. The moon, who has through the narrative been pale, has now been turned into a red and pale moon, hanging low above *Yharnam. Rom's* death can in many ways be seen as the turning point in the game's narrative, as the game world completely changes as a result.

As a result of *Provost Willem's* fear of the *Old Blood*, several scholars of the *Byrgenwerth College,* more prominently *Master Laurence* decided to split with *Willem's* methods and research. They wanted to take advantage of the *Old Blood*, believing it to be divine, using it to heal the sick and to gain power and wealth for *Yharnam. Master Laurence*, as a result, founded the *Healing Church*. *Willem* proved to be correct, as the use of the *Old Blood* resulted in *the scourge*, and the downfall of *Yharnam's* golden age. *Laurence,* with the *Old Blood* at his disposal became the first *Cleric Beast*, a powerful and massive beast, as a result of exaggerated use of the blood. The only remnant of L*aurence* the player can find is his skull.

Runesmith Caryll is a character who *the Hunter* never encounters, but yet plays an enormous role regarding *Yharnam's* fate and the knowledge of the *Great Ones*. The language of the *Great Ones* is seen as incomprehensible to the average human, even to a scholar. It seemed however that *Runesmith Caryll* was different as she had a knack for visually representing the words of the Great Ones, carving them into runes. "Provost Willem would have been proud of Caryll's runes, as they do not rely upon blood in any measure" (*Rune Workshop Tool item Bloodborne*: 2015). Through these runes, scholars and hunters could access the strengths of the *Great Ones,* without directly interacting with them.

The School of Mensis, one of the *Healing Church's* sub-groups, located in the hidden village of *Yahar'gul*. One notable member of this school was *Micolash, Host of the Nightmare*, and can be considered one of the main antagonists. His goal, along with the *School of Mensis*, is to gain contact with the *Great Ones*. In the current status quo, *Micolash's* body is found by the

Hunter as a corpse with a hexagonal cage on his head. In the room, the Hunter can see several bodies in the same fashion as *Micolash*. "This hexagonal iron cage suggests their strange ways. The cage is a device that restrains the will of the self, allowing one to see the profane world for what it is" (*Mensis Cage item Bloodborne*: 2015). If *the Hunter* touches the body of *Micolash*, he/she is transferred to the *Nightmare of Mensis*, a manifestation of the wishes of the *School of Mensis:* a nightmare realm to gain knowledge of the *Great Ones*. As a result, *Micolash* is fanatical in his attempt to stay in the nightmare, wishing to be "granted eyes as vacuous Rom did". When *the Hunter* slays him, he screams "Now I'm waking up, I'll forget everything..." (*Micolash, Host of the Nightmare* Bloodborne: 2015).

The Choir of the Healing Church made contact with one *Great One,* known as the left behind *Great One, Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos. Ebrietas* was encountered by the members of the *Healing Church* in the ruins of *Pthumeru* and was then escorted back to the *Grand Cathedral. Ebrietas* is the only *Great One* mentioned that shows a wish to coexist with humans, granting much of the *Healing Church's* knowledge of the *Great Ones* that they currently bestow. Her cooperation resulted in the creation of the *kin Great One*, *Celestial Emissary, a kin* created from the orphans that the *Healing Church* experimented on, in order to find human transcendence. Her presence is the very reason why *kin* exists; humans that have transcended to become closer to the *Great Ones*.

In the next couple of paragraphs, I will be covering the role of the *Pthumeru* and the most notable characters connected to the *Pthumerians* and their role in the immanent religious narrative: *Queen Yharnam, the Pthumerian Queen*, is the first *Pthumerian the Hunter* encounters. After *Rom, the Vacuous Spider* is slain, and the moon has turned red, *the Hunter* can see her looking up to the moon, wearing a white dress, bloodstained near her abdominal region, showing resemblance of a miscarriage. She is the mother of the *infant Great One, Mergo*, which is the source of the nightmare that currently haunts *Yharnam*. Her wounds, and her being handcuffed, suggest that *Mergo* has been taken from her by force.

The father of *Mergo* is suspected to be the formless *Great One, Oedon.* O*edon* is never seen, but plays a significant role regarding humanity's connection with the *Great Ones*. His role is attempting to create children with mortals. This is evidently seen with *Oedon* being the father of *Mergo* and *Queen Yharnam* being the mother. It is also shown when two female *NPCs* are impregnated, leaving behind a *Great One umbilical cord* each after their death, hinting at their connection to a *Great One:* "Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate,

and Oedon, the formless Great One, is no different" (*Third Umbilical Cord item Bloodborne:* 2015).

[Figure 5.6: The carcass of the *Great One Kos* near the shores of *Fishing Hamlet* in the *Hunter's Nightmare*]

The last *Great One* that I will be covering is *Kos*, which is mentioned by *Micolash* in the original release of the game, but appears as a carcass in the later added content *The Old Hunters*. *Kos* was revered by the villagers of *Fishing Hamlet*. By her powers, they mutated into beings that take the appearance of humanoid fish. It is uncertain as to why *Kos* is dead when *the Hunter* arrives in the *Hunter's Nightmare*, although it is hinted that she died when arriving at the shores of *Fishing Hamlet*. What is certain however, is that *Provost Willem* (see page 75) sent hunters from *Byrgenwerth* to discover the knowledge the villagers supposedly had acquired through their worship of *Kos*. As a result, the *hunters of Byrgenwerth* cut open the skulls of the villagers in order to extract their *insight*. These hunters also found the body of *Kos* drifted ashore. They violated the body of *Kos*, hoping to acquire more knowledge. *Kos* shows one of the true powers of the *Great Ones*. Even in death, the mind of a *Great One* is unending. The source for the *Hunter's Nightmare* – a dream meant to punish and torture the hunters that violated her body – are still in effect, never letting any of the hunters wake up from their never-ending nightmare.

5.4   Characters and narrative – Level two

The contribution to the immanent religious narrative of *Bloodborne* through its characters is prominent, as many of these characters have a direct connection to the divinity that is surrounding the game world. I will now list my findings when looking at the characters and reflect on how these characters express and create representations through the narratological structure they are set in.

Applying a thick description to the characters I have made these findings: (1) The protagonist, plays as a foreigner, and just like the player, has no knowledge of the game world. It becomes the player's task through the gameplay and the three different endings to either distance themselves from the cycle, continue the cycle or break the cycle. Regardless of these endings, the protagonist plays a major role in terms of changing the status quo, as all the characters that interact with him/her changes their role and their plots as the protagonist progresses through the game. When we compare it to *FFX*, the protagonists are placed in opposite roles. *FFX'* narrative is linear, and *Tidus'* (see page 49) role becomes clear early on in the game, as an opposition of the game world's immanent religious narrative. The role of the protagonist of *Bloodborne* is much vaguer, particularly regarding the three different endings. The protagonist is not an opposition, but rather an explorer of the status quo, making the games express their critique in different ways to each other. (2) *Gehrman* plays the role as the origin of the hunter group and as the player's guide. Although the player does not interact much with him, all the tools used in the *Hunter's Dream* are his, which he allows the player to use in order to become a more efficient hunter. His connection to the *Moon Presence* and the fact that the *Hunter's Dream* is a memory of his, reflects the notion of an origin, from a human perspective.

(3) *The Moon Presence* is the game's current status quo. It symbolizes the cycle. While it is also the catalyst for the cycle, it also plays the role as origin, as its connection, especially to *Gehrman*, draws on the fact that the cycle has been going on for a long time. In both *FFX* and *Bloodborne,* the cycle is connected through divinity and humanity. *Bloodborne* connects the *Moon Presence* to *Gehrman*, whereas in *FFX, Sin* (see page 43) is connected to *summoners* who sacrificed themselves. (4) *Provost Willem, Runesmith Caryll* and *Master Laurence* all play the roles as the connection between humanity and divinity, and the hubris that humankind has fallen into in the game world's narrative. They all play different parts: *Willem*

wants to gain divine knowledge, while *Laurence* wants divine power. *Caryll* is the middle-man, that connects all these findings to the player and the other hunters that exist in the game world. These three characters carry many similarities to *Lady Yunalesca* (see page 50-51) and *Yu Yevon* (see page 50) as the role of culprits to the game worlds' cycles. While *Willem*, *Caryll* and *Laurence* created the status quo of *Bloodborne* through their research, *Yunalesca* and *Yu Yevon* created *FFX'* status quo through summoning and temporarily defeating *Sin.*

(5) *Rom, the Vacuous Spider* represents human transcendence. Looking at the background story of *Rom*, who was originally a human, and became *a kin Great One* as a result of meeting a true *Great One*. *Rom* becomes the character that reveals the true status quo of the game after its defeat. Much like *Bloodborne*, *FFX* hides its true status quo through the narrative. While *Rom* reveals the status quo of *Bloodborne*, *FFX* expresses its status quo through *Jecht* (see page 50). They both, as previously mentioned, were initially humans, but have now turned into something more. However, while characters of the game world in *Bloodborne* strive for this transcendence, it is expressed as a horrible fate in *FFX*. (6) *Micolash, Host of the Nightmare* and *Ebrietas, the Daughter of the Cosmos* represents the methods that the immanent religion used in order to acquire more divine knowledge. Although they are two completely different entities, *Micolash* being a human, whereas *Ebrietas* being *a kin Great One,* they both represent the same. *Micolash* wants to acquire knowledge by gaining insight, while *Ebrietas* helped the immanent religion gaining knowledge through blood and experimentation.

(7) *Queen Yharnam, Mergo* and *Oedon* represents the game's primeval history. *Queen Yharnam* as a *Pthumerian* represents the ancient history of the game world, and her connection to *Oedon* and their parentage to *Mergo* connects humanity to the *Great Ones*. (8) *Kos* is the *Great One* that represents the sympathetic nature, yet terrible power that the Great One possess, making them the immanent religious notion in the game. *Kos* as the host of the *Hunter's Nightmare* shows the power it wields over humans, allowing to torture and punish mortals even in death.

The characters in *Bloodborne,* apart from the protagonist, represent various elements of the status quo, and the reason why the status quo is what it is. Their procedural rhetoric express and persuades the player into wanting to know more. Much as how the protagonist is an outsider, so is the player, and plays almost as an interactive spectator, allowing the status quo to be changed according to what type of ending the player receives after exploring and

revealing the narratological structure of the game. The role of the protagonist is vague, making the endings more open for interpretation. It is very distinct what *FFX* wants to express through its protagonists, making it clear that the player is in opposition of the status quo. *Bloodborne* however does not explain the endings' consequences, expressing the player's role to explore and familiarize himself/herself with the narrative in order to be able to interpret it.

Even though the characters in the games play different roles in comparison to each other, they carry similarities, as it is the connection between humanity and divinity that is the cause of the status quo. However, *Bloodborne* expresses its status quo and the punishment of humanity as a result of humanity wanting to become divine, whereas in *FFX* the status quo is expressed through the continuation of the cycle, making it apparent that the only alternative for humanity to break the cycle is to disregard tradition and have a world of no religion. Like with *Bloodborne's* game world, the characters do not reject the immanent religious ideas and notions of the game. Instead, they reconfigure them by showing various methods and interpretations, not only by the in-game characters, but also from the interpretations of the player.

[Figure 5.7: *Bloodborne's* character creation screen. allowing the player to choose name, gender, age, origin and appearance, as well as seeing the various stats the player can upgrade by defeating enemies]

5.5   Ludology of the player/character – Level one

The ludological design of *Bloodborne* is fairly unique in terms of its structure, as several aspects of the ludology of the game are integrated in the narratological structure of the game. What makes it interesting is that most of the narrative in the game cannot be accessed if the player does not engage properly with the game's ludological design. In this sense, several ludological functions also carry a narratological function. As I progress in this section, I will point out examples of these, as some of them play a major role in terms of the immanent religious narrative in Bloodborne.

Performance rules are how the player/character's actions can affect the game and its ludological design, and how they are linked together. In *Bloodborn*e, the actions performed by the player are expressed through combat/exploration. While traversing the game world, the player has the ability to attack, run, jump and roll. Depending on what the player is equipped with in terms of weapons and items, the attacks and abilities of the player can change.

The *operation rules* are the rules that tells us how the player's actions in the real world affect the character in the virtual world. *Bloodborne's* operation rules are linked between the player's actions with a controller and how the character performs according to what buttons the player pushes. While certain buttons are meant to distinguish between strong attacks and light attacks, the other buttons are assigned for rolling, using consumables or switching weapon types. The way Bloodborne is designed forces the player to interact with the game world on a much higher level of ludological interaction than many other games, as it requires the player to become familiar with the controls in order to perform well in the game.

[Figure 5.8: An *Amygdala (A Great One)* that can only be seen once the player has acquired 40 or more *insight* near the *Cathedral Ward*. Various effects can be seen as far as with 60 *insight*. In this picture, we also see, from top left health (red bar), stamina (green bar), blood vials (top left), *quicksilver bullets* (top bottom left) and consumable item (where it says fire paper). On the right we see on *blood echoes*, the in-game experience and currency (top) and *insight* (top bottom)]

State rules are the rules that show the states of the player/character. The state rules in *Bloodborne* are shown through a health-bar, a stamina-bar (that limits the player/character's ability to infinitely roll, dodge and attack), consumables called blood vials (that replenishes lost health) and *quicksilver bullets* (meant to be used for certain types of weapons in the game). It also shows the types of weapons equipped, such as secondary and primary weapons. One last state shown is *insight.* This affects the game both on a narratological level as well as a ludological level. Having more *insight* makes things in the game world appear that could not be seen otherwise. It plays on the narratological design, but also the ludological level, as things appear differently, and certain enemies, as a result, become more powerful, making the game "harder to play" (Bogost 2011: 43). The player/character also has attributes, gained through experience. These attributes are what makes the player/character unique, as the stats are fundamentally important in terms of how it alters the player's playstyle. Experience is gained through blood echoes, which can be used to buy consumable items, weapons, upgrades, or to level up, making the overall statistics of the player/character more powerful.

Rules for inducing behavior is how videogames persuade the player/character into performing certain actions, often through a reward and punishment system. *Bloodborne* is very explicit

when it comes to the types of behavior it wishes for its players. The player, in many ways, has much freedom to explore the game world. However, it punishes the player for not becoming immersed in its ludological design, making the game extremely challenging for anyone who does not interact with the game on a deeper level and to become familiar with the game world's enemies and enemy types.

Game mechanics are the very core of the videogame, and are the rules that indicate the level of skill that the player has to put in relation to the skills and actions of the character. Not becoming familiar with the character's vast sets of attacks, weapons and the overall combat system results in a high probability of no progression within the game's narrative. Increasing the player's own skill and familiarity with the game represents how powerful a hunter in *Bloodborne* can be. The game mechanics are based around combat. The weapons found in the game are representative of the game world, and every weapon is unique. For instance, having a weapon that possess the powers of the *Great Ones* changes the combat style of the character, representing the power that *Great Ones* bestow from a narratological perspective.

5.6   Ludology of the player/character – Level two

Looking at the ludological design of the player/character of *Bloodborne,* I can make a comparative analysis of my findings in Bloodborne and my findings in *Final Fantasy X.* These games are entirely different from each other in terms of how their ludological design, and thus can create different ways of expressing and persuading with the same principal rules of ludology:

(1) Performance rules in *Bloodborne* enhances the game world through the player/character. This becomes more prominent in terms of weapons, as their design is unique depending on what design the weapon has. The player/character's ability to use a *Great Ones'* artifact, for instance, creates a notion of the *Great Ones'* presence in the game world. *FFX* and *Bloodborne* do the same, as they strengthen the immanent religious narrative through the performance rules, yet do it differently, as *FFX* emphasizes the unique characters, while the *Bloodborne* emphasizes on the player/character's interaction with the game world. (2) The operation rules of *Bloodborne*, although similar in its basic form to *FFX*, has a different form of representation. The operation rules enhance the player's own ability to control the character, through its challenging "hard to play" style of gameplay (Bogost 2011: 43), thus

creating a symbolic representation of the character as a more efficient hunter. (3) While much of the state rules in *Bloodborne* represents the player/character's efficiency to proceed within the game's narrative, the *insight* trait given has major rhetorical value regarding the game world and the player/character. The insight creates the representation that the character now has more knowledge of the game world, through audiovisual means, by showing hidden horrors, unique sounds and more difficult enemies. Just as with *FFX*, the state rules are there to reconfigure the unique abilities that the character possesses, yet it is more directly connected to the narrative.

(4) The rules for inducing behavior in *Bloodborne* do not force, but rather encourage the player to invest his/her time in the game's narrative. While *FFX* forces the player/character to oppose the status quo through its limited alternatives, the player/character in *Bloodborne* is met with less forced actions, with the exception of certain obligatory bosses. If the player does not engage in the encouraged behavior, the player is never met with certain key narratological elements that structures the immanent religious narrative of *Bloodborne*. (5) Regarding the game mechanics, *FFX* and *Bloodborne* do not force, but encourages the player to take an interest in the game world. Although prominent in *FFX*, it is even more so in *Bloodborne*, especially in relation to the skill gap between player and character. Not familiarizing oneself with the game world, will make much of the game's weapons, bosses and areas nonsensical. It also makes the game more difficult, much like with *FFX*, because both games require a certain knowledge of the enemy types and their weaknesses and strengths.

The ludological design of the player/character contributes to the immanent religious narrative in *Bloodborne*, just like with *FFX*. There are however a few key differences, mainly that while the status quo in *FFX* is apparent, and the player's role is obvious through its forced gameplay, *Bloodborne* never forces the player to engage with the immanent religious narrative and the game world's status quo, but yet encourages this. The ludology is also integrated directly to the narrative, especially through the insight state rule, unique in its design compared to the state rules given in *FFX*. The game's ludological design does not necessarily reflect or reconfigure immanent religious ideas and notions. It all depends on the player's own level of immersion and interaction. The game's overall structure, should the player choose to interact with the narratological and ludological design, will reveal that the

game reconfigures religious notions and ideas through the game world's items, enemies and state rules.

5.7   Ludology of the game world – Level one

The *spatiotemporal design* of a videogame is to what extent player interaction affects the game world. This is distinguished between active and reactive environments, meaning how much the game world is dependent on the player. The game world of *Bloodborne* is affected in various ways in relation to player interaction. For instance, the game world reacts to the amount of insight the player has, and changes the environment, making it a reactive environment, as the world does not change before the player takes action. Another example of *Bloodborn*e as a reactive environment is when the player defeats Rom, the Vacuous Spider (see page 76). When that happens, is that the world changes. Slaying Rom carries much of the same effects as if the player has a lot of *insight* (see page 83), showing the game world differently.

The rules for blocking/unblocking areas and states in the game world are the rules that state when or how the player can access certain areas or states in the game world. In *Bloodborne's* rules are linked to the narratological structure of the game. Several areas cannot be accessed except if the player possess certain items or states in the game. A simple example of this is that the player often requires a key to access new areas to progress within the narrative.

The patterns of behavior of none-playable characters are the rules that state the fundamental behavior of *NPCs* in relation to player behavior. *Bloodborne's NPCs* are often stationary, meant to be engaged in dialogue. However, there are certain rules that are an exception to these. If the player attacks for instance a friendly *NPC,* the *NPC* might turn hostile. The behavior of *NPCs* is also changed based on the game world's current state and how they are represented. For instance, one of the *Yharnamites* that the player can rescue will never attack, should the player decide to attack her, as she is depicted as an older woman. When progressing in certain *NPC-plots*, the behavior of the *NPC* might change in order for the plot to express a change in the character's personality, traits or hidden agenda.

Rules of objects in the game world work the same way as the pattern of *NPCs*, being either active or reactive in terms of player actions. In *Bloodborne*, the objects of the game world are often reactive, and rather passive. Many of the objects, with the exception of doors and

elevators, do not fundamentally change according to the player's actions of narratological progress. However, items, such as weapons and some consumables, may represent the game world and explain it further through their design.

The rules for inducing behavior (the game world as a catalyst of behaviors) (Latorre 2015: 423) are the rules that state that certain actions or changes to the game world ultimately changes the representation of the player/character, *NPCs* and the game world itself. As previously mentioned regarding the rules for inducing behavior, the true catalyst in *Bloodborne* is the fight between the player and *Rom*. This changes the game world in terms of graphical aspects of the game, but also in terms of *NPCs*. It is however not exclusive to the fight versus Rom, but general actions that progress the story. An example of this is with one particular *NPC* named Iosefka who shows an empathetic behavior towards the player when interacting with her. After defeating an obligatory boss, *Iosefka's* behavior changes, becoming more malicious and potentially an enemy of the player, representing *Iosefka's* loss of sanity. The game world changes as the player progresses, but many of these changes are optional to interact with.

5.8   Ludology of the game world – Level two

The role of the ludological design of the game world in terms of its contribution to the immanent religious narrative is essential, as it is the rules that state the relationship between player/character and the game world. From an abstract definition, *FFX* and *Bloodborne* are very similar in this regard, but as I have stated, they represent it differently through the same rules.

Looking at the ludological rules of the game world, these are my findings of *Bloodborne*: (1) The spatiotemporal design of the game world can be defined as a reactive environment, as only player actions can change the game world in any sort of way. This is seen when defeating *Rom* as the game world changes completely through audiovisual means, creating much of the same effects as if the player has much of the state rule insight. Similar to *FFX,* the world changes as the narrative progresses. The relationship between the player/character and the game world does not change much through the course of the story, except for the endings, where the player/character can decide to directly partake in the game world's immanent religious narrative, or to distance himself/herself away from it. (2) Similar to *FFX,*

the rules of blocking/unblocking areas and states of the game world in *Bloodborne* is essential in its contribution of the immanent religious narrative, as one of the main turning points in the game (killing and defeating *Rom*) is crucial to understanding *Bloodborne's* world. *Bloodborne*, unlike *FFX*, also gives access to optional areas of the game world, that will contribute even more to the immanent religious narrative, as the information received from these areas is unique in its role of the narrative.

(3) *Bloodborne's* rules regarding patterns of *NPC* behavior is very similar to *FFX*. The various *NPCs* are depicted differently and represent the game world through their behavior. They all will be opposed to the player attacking them for instance, but their behavior might change depending on how they are depicted, as one might fight back, representing for instance a skilled hunter, while another might not even defend themselves, representing a commoner of the game world. Unlike *FFX*, the *NPCs'* behavior does not contribute to the player's role in opposing the status quo, but to rather obtain an understanding of it. (4) The rules of objects in the game world do not contribute much to the immanent religious narrative with its exception of weapons and consumables. While *FFX'* objects contribute to the immanent religious narrative through player interaction with the objects, the objects in *Bloodborne* do not necessarily, but can contribute to it, depending on player engagement. (5) The rules for inducing behavior in the game world are very different in *FFX* and *Bloodborne*. While *FFX* induces the player to oppose the status quo of the game world and is a vital part of the narrative, *Bloodborne* does not induce player behavior in relation to the status quo. However, it forces the player to explore in order to progress the narrative, and might induce the player with a more thorough search of the game world in order for the player to actually understand the narrative and its structure.

While *FFX'* ludological rules force the player to engage in opposing the status quo of the game world, *Bloodborne* forces the player to explore, and encourages to understand the game world. *FFX* through its forced nature contributes to the immanent religious narrative in a far more prominent way than *Bloodborne*. However, the contribution of the immanent religious narrative potentially has way more to add than in *FFX* because of its rich world to explore, but might also not contribute at all, depending on the player's own engagement to the narrative. As with most of *Bloodborne's* ludological design, the rhetorical value of the game depends much on a player's own interaction. Also, as with *Bloodborne's* design, the game does not reject the immanent religious ideas and notions, but reconfigures them by letting the

player interact with items and areas that can help create an understanding of the game's immanent religious narrative.

5.9   Ludology of game activities – Level one

The patterns of action regarding the final objective are the rules that state what actions are entitled as actions of progress, and what actions that are sanctioned and halt the narrative's progress. The general pattern of actions in *Bloodborne* are exploring, defeating enemies, unlocking new areas and encountering bosses. The narratological structure of *Bloodborne* is that the player moves through the night of the hunt, and the more the player follows the patterns of action, the further into the night the player progresses, shown visually with the game world changing as the player progresses.

[Figure 5.9: One of the messages stating *Bloodborne's* progression. "NIGHTMARE SLAIN" happens only three times in the game, which includes *Mergo's Wet Nurse*, *The Moon Presence* and *The Orphan of Kos* as they are the hosts of the nightmares the player steps into]

The winning and losing conditions are the fundamental aspect of videogames, where the overall winning condition is completing the final goal of the game, designed uniquely in each game. The losing conditions are where the game's design is meant to show the player what actions that "punish" the player, resulting in no progression of the story. In *Bloodborne*, the ludological design of the winning and losing conditions is simple. If the player dies, the game shows a screen with "YOU DIED" in red letters. The winning conditions however are often

shown when defeating bosses, where the player receives "PREY SLAUGHTERED", or against certain bosses "NIGHTMARE SLAIN", indicating the progression of the game and a step closer to the final objective of the game.

The degree of redundancy versus variability of game play is the distinction between how varied the overall gameplay is from a ludological point of view. Either the game requires only one way to complete the game, or it requires several varied actions, increasing the overall variability of gameplay. In *Bloodborne*, one could argue that the game is fairly redundant, as the overall game is to defeat challenging bosses to progress in the game. However, the bosses are so unique in their ludological design, and so challenging, that it requires the player to learn the patterns of the bosses to be able to defeat them, making the game varied in terms of its design. The game's optional exploration of the *Chalice Dungeons* also contributes to variability of the game, resulting in new bonuses, new items and more information regarding the lore of *Bloodborne*, even though the fundamental game mechanics stay the same.

Game mechanics is the fundamental design of the player/character, but also plays a role regarding game activities. The activities performed in *Bloodborne* are often related to how the game world is represented, and the game activities changes the world as the player progresses. Combat is the main activity that contributes to the ludological design of *Bloodborne*. This is shown when defeating bosses, as the information about the game world is often accessed through the completion of these fights. In addition to the combat; exploring and reading items also contributes to the overall representation of the game world, making the exploration a vital game activity in order to understand exactly what the game world wants to express and represent through its narrative.

Chains of actions are the rules that consist of several game activities put together in a form of a "script" in order for the player to progress in the narrative. *Bloodborne's* chains of actions are linked to exploration and combat. In order to be able to encounter the bosses that are hidden in the game world, the player is forced to explore. However, the chains of actions are not all that strict, allowing the player to explore the world through different sets of routes in order to achieve the same progression. An example of this is acquiring a key to unlock an obligatory area at an earlier point than usual. The player can either defeat a certain boss that will unlock the door to the *Grand Cathedral*, or the key can be bought with *blood echoes* from a merchant to gain access without attacking the boss, making the game arguably easier than it would be through fighting the boss.

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Strategical/tactical dilemmas are the ludic design that give the player several alternatives to complete certain objectives. In the paragraph above, I mentioned, the two ways to access the Grand Cathedral in Bloodborne. However, the more meaningful strategy of Bloodborne is in its endings. There are three different endings, as mentioned in the character section. There are however risks, as the one ending is easier than another. In other words, it requires the player to take a risk. By taking the "easy route" the player can complete the game, without engaging in any more boss-fights. The second alternative requires the player to fight *Gehrman,* considered to be one of the harder bosses in the game. The third alternative is only accessed through chains of actions that have to be completed before the entry of the last phase of the game. By consuming three *umbilical cords of a Great One*, the player is granted the last ending, which requires the player to fight first *Gehrman,* and then *The Moon Presence*, making this ending seemingly more difficult than the other two. The most important aspect of this is what these endings represent from a narratological perspective: The first one represents that the night of the hunt continues, the second one represents the replacement of the *Hunter's Dream's*, while the third ends the current cycle, transcending the player/character into divinity, perhaps changing the game world for the better.

5.10   Ludology and game activities – Level two

Through the game activities the relationship between the player/character and game world is created, and in that sense also contributes to enhancing both the status quo and the immanent religious narrative of *Bloodborne.* Through the ludological rules of game activities, the immanent religious narrative becomes more apparent:

(1) The patterns of actions regarding the final objective is *Bloodborne's* most forced game activity for the player. It is easy to depict what the progressive and non-progressive actions, based on the fate of the player/character; either they survive or die. In this regard, *FFX* and *Bloodborne* are designed the same. However, while *FFX* only gives one ending, *Bloodborne* gives three different endings, thus changing the status quo and the player/character's role in it. While the two first endings are easy to access, the third requires the player to perform patterns of actions almost impossible to receive if the player does not engage with the game world and its immanent religious narrative. In this sense the third ending represents the player's own commitment through game activities and their role as the opposing force of the status quo of *Bloodborne*. (2) The winning and losing conditions of *Bloodborne* is similar to *FFX*, in its

prominent way of showing whether the player "wins" or "loses". However, the conditions add to the narrative in *Bloodborne,* as in particular the winning screens state "PREY SLAUGHTERED" or "NIGHTMARE SLAIN", representing the player's efficiency as a hunter.

(3) Although the way to reach the ending sequences of *Bloodborne* is linear in the sense of who and what to defeat in order to progress within the narrative, the three endings make the game less redundant and more varied, as they contribute to what role the player plays in the immanent religious narrative. This makes the game more varied in comparison to *FFX*. (4) It is the player who decides how much meaning the game activities carry through his/her role as an interpreter. In this regard, the game mechanics can, but do not necessarily, contribute to the immanent religious narrative. *FFX'* game mechanics contribute to it no matter what, as it forces the player through its activities, while *Bloodborne* can carry potentially more contribution. This is notable in the activities that are required to do in order to receive the third ending.

(5) Chains of actions are fundamental for the player/character to receive the third ending in Bloodborne. It is the chains of actions, although not obligatory, which truly add to the contribution of the immanent religious narrative in *Bloodborne,* as it requires in-depth knowledge of both the narratological and ludological structure. This is different than *FFX,* where the chains of actions are there mainly to reach the final objective, which is unchangeable no matter what. (6) The strategical/tactical dilemma in *Bloodborne* in comparison to *FFX* is more advanced in its connection to the immanent religious narrative. The dilemma in *FFX* is limited to understanding the game mechanics of the game, while in *Bloodborne*, it requires a deep understanding of the game's narrative and ludology. From a narratological standpoint this dilemma is connected to the endings of *Bloodborne*. The player can choose to not partake in the game world anymore and complete the game with the first ending. Should the player choose a different ending, the player adds to the risk of having a more difficult time completing the game, as a new boss appears. The third ending has the higher risk, with two boss-fights in order to receive it, but from a narratological view, adds a tenfold to the immanent religious narrative compared to the other endings, as it truly connects the *Great Ones* to humanity.

5.11   Major findings from Bloodborne

The ludological and narratological structure of *Bloodborne* clearly shows a critical view of both religion and humanity. Through the narrative, we learn that the status quo has ultimately become what it is because of humanity's greed and lust for power, through any means necessary. Unlike *FFX*, the procedural religion does not express a procedural rhetoric of no religion, but rather how the connection between humanity and religion is ultimately corrupt by humanity's will to power and to transcend into divinity. Like *FFX*, *Bloodborne* criticizes human corruption and a wish to break the cycle, but through different means. While *FFX'* procedural religion expresses a wish for no religion, *Bloodborne's* procedural religion expresses religion as a constant entity, and that its core is ultimately not changeable, but can be altered by the humans in power.

In conclusion, the will to power in *Bloodborne* is ultimately corrupt and the culprit for the status quo, and only through the lack of will to power can humanity transcend to divinity and break the cycle that currently terrorizes the game world of *Bloodborne*. Unlike *FFX*, which reflects religious notions and ideas through its status quo and game world, and rejects them through the game activities and player/character, *Bloodborne* reconfigures these, by making the player/character a vital part in discovering the various ways the immanent religion of the game world is implemented into the narratological ludological design.

5.12   Religious critique in the ludological and narratological structure – Level three

I have now gone through the essential findings of *Bloodborne* and compared them to my findings of *Final Fantasy X*. I have concluded that the procedural religion of *Bloodborne* is that the immanent religion is corrupt as a result of humanity's desire for power and knowledge, and that the status quo is a cycle that needs to be broken. Through the narrative, we learn that humanity has fallen, as game's status quo is a world in ruins. The immanent religion has attempted two distinct methods to gain knowledge and power in order for humanity to transcend into a higher plane of existence. In this sense, it carries similarities to the story of *Genesis 3, the Fall of Man*, where Adam and Eve consume the fruit of knowledge and obtain the same knowledge as God: the ability to differ between good and evil, and as a result are banished from the Garden of Eden. *Bloodborne,* similar to *FFX*, expresses a desire

to break the cycle of the status quo. However, whereas *FFX* expresses elements of both a Marxian and Nietzschean line of thinking, *Bloodborne* expresses a critique of Nietzsche's philosophy and religious critique, through the game's own religious critique.

The status quo of *Bloodborne* expresses a perspective of humanity as a race that desires power and knowledge and through that can transcend humanity as a whole. This perspective carries similarities to Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" (Nietzsche 2010: 93). Nietzsche explains "will to power" as such: "Wherever I found a living thing, there found I Will to Power; and even in the will of the servant found I the will to be master" (Nietzsche 2010: 93). For Nietzsche, the purpose of the living is to gain power. The "will to power" is life-improving, and an instinct that is even stronger than the "Will of Life" (Nietzsche 2010: 94). It is a strong element of humanity's nature, and something that Nietzsche strives for in his wish for man to become "overman" or "übermensch" (Nietzsche 2010: 13). In the course of *Bloodborne's* narrative, we see actions that expresses a "will to power". These actions, more specifically the actions of *Byrgenwerth* (gaining *insight*) and the *Healing Church* (through the *Great Ones' blood*) are the reasons why the game world has fallen into its current status quo, and is a part of the cycle which is hinted at with the fate of *Pthumeru* and that their land carries similarities to the game's current status quo. In other words, the "will to power" is the cycle of the status quo.

FFX expresses similarities to Nietzsche's statement of "God is dead" (Nietzsche 2010: 12) and that the immanent religion should dissolve in order for humanity to improve their life. *Bloodborne* on the contrary clearly shows that divinity and humanity is connected, more specifically when looking at the third ending of the game, where the protagonist becomes an infant *Great One*, in other words; a human transcended. The game vaguely criticizes Nietzsche's concept of both "God is dead" and "Will to power" by showing distinct methods in the game that punished humanity's attempt at becoming divine in nature, as well as being close to the polar opposite of what *FFX* expresses through its procedural religion.

However, both games express a desire to break the cycle of the status quo, which is Nietzsche's goal: to break from the concept of "eternal recurrence" as he explains it in *The Gay Scienc*e:

> 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and

> everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' (Williams 2008: 194-195).

Thus, we can say that while both games express a desire to break the cycle, the "eternal recurrence", their procedural rhetoric is vastly different, and as a result has different expressions of their procedural religion in order for the respective game worlds to improve.

Comparing *FFX* and *Bloodborne* and how they express elements of philosophical religious critique can be concluded with these findings:

(1) The status quo carries similarities to that of the biblical story of *Fall of Man*, as it is humanity's own nature and thus fault that the world has fallen to its current state. (2) The narrative of both *FFX* and *Bloodborne* carry elements of Nietzschean philosophy, but while *FFX* embraces the philosophy, *Bloodborne* criticizes it. (3) It is the "will to power" that has created the current status quo of *Bloodborne*, and the methods that attempt to transcend humanity shown within the game carries both a "will to power", which is punished by the game's narrative. (4) It becomes the player/character's lack of "will to power" that trumps the "will to power" by transcending humanity, becoming divine and breaking the "eternal recurrence" and the cycle that haunts the status quo. In comparison, *FFX* expresses a "will to power" from the protagonist to become an "overman" in order to break the cycle.

I can conclude with much of the same as I did with *FFX: Bloodborne* carries elements from Nietzschean line of thinking, however these elements criticize Nietzsche's definition of humanity's nature and wants to distance themselves from that nature. It becomes the "will to power" that corrupts humanity, and as a result, also religion, which is an opposition to the resemblances of Nietzsche's philosophy that I found in my discoveries of *Final Fantasy X*.

6 Conclusion

This thesis builds on the idea that videogames, a sub-genre of popular culture, can be an expressive medium where meaningful representations and meaning-making occurs. More specifically, this thesis is a multidisciplinary project utilizing the fields of media and religion in order to look at how videogames as a computational form reflect, reject or reconfigure religious ideas.

The thesis seeks to answer how the immanent representation of religion in videogames can contain religious critique and what kind of religious critique is implied in them. To answer this research question, I have chosen *Final Fantasy X* and *Bloodborn*e as the material to analyze. The main theoretical concepts used in the analysis are procedural rhetoric, coined by Bogost (2010) and procedural religion, coined by Šisler (2016). Procedural rhetoric refers how computer-based rule-systems express and create representation. Procedural religion refers to the way videogames express religious ideas and notions through their rule systems. The games are analyzed both in regard to their narratological as well as their ludological design

The main finding concerning *FFX* is that the status quo of the game represents a cycle of destruction, where the immanent religion plays a role as the maintainer of it. The immanent religion of the game is shown as a corrupt and hypocritical religion, which uses its influence to maintain its position. To get out of the status quo the player must oppose the immanent religion, through both the narrative and ludic design. *FFX* rejects the religious ideas established in the immanent game world, by forcing the player to commit actions that expresses the immanent religion as corrupt and an opposition of the game's overall goal; to end the religion of the game. Religious ideas such as martyrdom, reincarnation, cycles and pilgrimage are rejected through the game activities and how the design of the game rewards the player whenever these religious ideas are opposed.

The main finding in *Bloodborne* is that the immanent religion of the game represents the core of the status quo, but not the reason for the game's current state of affairs. The procedural religion game reconfigures the immanent religion, and it does not become the player's role to oppose the immanent religion, but rather explore it through its ludological design. Religious ideas such as human transcendence, mysticism and religion as a source of power is what

becomes prominent in the game's structure. The three endings of the game reconfigure these ideas, especially the one ending; rewarding the player with the protagonist's own transcendence to divinity if the player has explored the ludological design of the game and immersed oneself with the narrative.

The status quo and cycle is created by humanity's will to power and wish to transcend into divinity. In order for the player to oppose the status quo, the player has to embrace the immanent religion and the cycle and reincarnation, reconfiguring it, by learning the game's narratological and ludological structure. The immanent religion expressed in *Bloodborne's* procedural religion is not altered in its core, but rather changed externally because of human hubris and will to power.

The thesis shows how both games carry resemblances to the religious critique seen from modern philosophers from the early 20th century. Explicitly, *FFX* carries resemblances to both Marx and Nietzsche, while *Bloodborne* more so resembles Nietzsche. The most intriguing result of the analysis is that the religious critique implied in the games' ludological and narratological designs expresses themselves as counterparts. Whereas *FFX* addresses Nietzsche's will to power as the key to break the eternal recurrence, *Bloodborne* address Nietzsche's will to power as the culprit to the eternal recurrence. Both expresses a desire to break the cycle of religious destruction, but in *FFX* the task is to become an "übermensch", to detach from the immanent religion, and to create a permanent solution to the issues in the game world, while *Bloodborne* expresses how such a "will to power" corrupts humanity, and as a result, also religion. The "will to power" is the reason the status quo remains in its current state, not the cycle itself.

Much like with other types of popular culture, videogames function as a reflection of how society perceives certain aspects of modern culture. Analyzing religion in videogames is a field that can impact how people look at religion, but is a field that requires more research. There is a need for more analyses about what kind of religious critique that can be implied in a videogame's content. Videogames have the ability to reflect how certain theories and philosophies regarding religious critique are perceived in modern society, more so than other types of popular culture, because of their unique participatory nature.

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Appendix

Boss – Often unique in its design, bosses are powerful opponents to the player/character, often obstructing the narrative of the game, providing the player with a challenge. Often bosses have a unique connection to the main narrative of the videogame.

Consumables – A term meant to describe single-use items. As the name implies, once used by the character, the item is consumed, and cannot be used again unless the player has more of the same item.

Downloadable content (DLC) – DLCs are extra-content for a videogame added after its original release. DLCs can include bonus items, cosmetics, stories, new areas to explore and new enemies to defeat.

Experience (EXP) – The term to describe a character's strength. EXP is often gained through completing tasks and game activities tied to the videogame's ludological design.

Level (LVL) – A term used to describe that a character has increased in strength and is often considered a milestone in a character's EXP progression. The more levels a character has gained, the stronger the character is.

Item – A general term to describe an object that the player/character can interact with, often collected. There are several varieties of items.

Key item – An item that plays a significant role in either the main-narrative or sub-narrative of a videogame and is needed in order to progress the narrative.

Turned-based combat - A type of combat format exclusive to the videogame genre. It is identified with each character/enemy having its own turn of action without interruption.

Mini-game/puzzles – Often used to describe game activities that are unique in their rule-systems in comparison to the more standard game activities of the videogames' ludic design.

Gameplay – A word used to describe the actual playing of the game. Gameplay is also the term used to bind all the elements of the game that create the ludic design of the game.

NPC – Short for none-playable character. The general term used to describe characters that the player is not able to control.

In-game – When mentioning something within the game from a ludological or narratological point of view.

RPG – Short for role-playing game. A genre identified by giving the player freedom inside the game's parameters. It gives the player a role, that becomes the catalyst for the game's narrative. Depending on the game, the player can have a pre-defined character or one that is

created by the player themselves.

jRPG – Short for Japanese role-playing game. A sub-genre of the RPG genre. It is often identified by its linear narrative and pre-defined characters with a mix of both action and character-development.

aRPG - Short for action role-playing game. A sub-genre of the RPG genre. Often identified with its action-oriented gameplay and little to no character-development from the protagonist.

Immersion is defined as the mental involvement of the participator. When speaking of a narrative that is easy to immerse oneself in, it means that the narrative is easy to get emotionally and mentally involved in. In videogames, immersion is defined not only as how much the narrative and ludology interacts with the player.